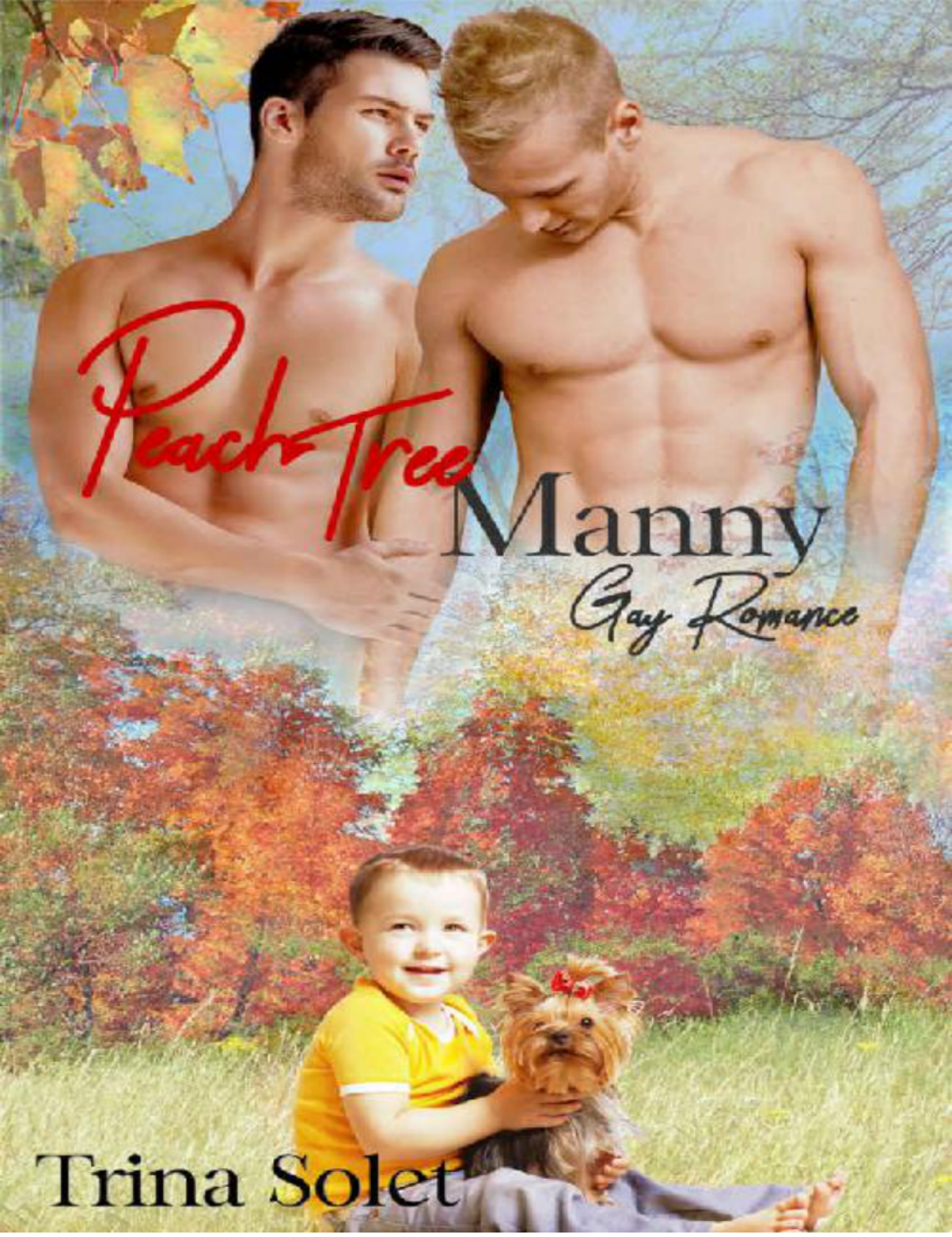
Peach Tree
Manny
Gay Romance
Trina Solet

Peach Tree Manny (Gay Romance) By Trina Solet
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Peach Tree Manny

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

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Chapter 1

Though the light had turned green, Julian looked down and saw that Danny wasn't ready to cross the street just yet. First the little boy made sure that all the cars were really stopped and only then took a tentative step onto the crosswalk while staying close to Julian's side.

As they crossed the street as fast as they could, his three-year-old little brother held onto Julian's hand with both of his little ones. Ever since he was in a car crash, traffic scared Danny, but he wouldn't let Julian carry him.

He didn't like the noise of traffic, and he jumped at any loud engine noise or whenever a car horn sounded or tires screeched. Afternoon rush hour was winding down, but this was still a busy area. Luckily, they soon arrived in front of the office building where Julian worked.

The office building towered above them, and Danny frowned. "It's big," he said in a hushed voice Julian could barely hear.

"We're not going too high up," Julian assured him. "You're going to see where I work." Or more accurately, where he worked until now. After all Julian was here to pick up some things before he relocated. At twenty-five, Julian was the youngest consultant at Upton Investments. He was keeping the same job, but he wouldn't be working out of Upton Investments offices any more.

In the lobby, Julian checked in with security and Danny looked around uncertainly. At the elevators, he took a deep breath before he bravely stepped inside. He was used to the elevators in Julian's apartment building, but he wasn't a fan of riding on them. Since Upton Investments offices were located on the fifteenth floor, taking the stairs wasn't an option.

On the fifteenth floor, the elevator doors opened to the slick décor of the office space. The sharp angles and gleaming metal didn't put Danny at ease. He looked all around cautiously and pulled closer to Julian.

It was after office hours. Only a few people would be working this late so the place wouldn't be too crowded or hectic. For Danny's sake, that's exactly what Julian wanted. He had picked this time for another reason. Pete Thayer shouldn't be in the office after regular working hours, so this was a good time for Julian to go in and get his things without running into him.

As they made their way to his office, Julian hoped Danny would be more comfortable in there.

"I just need to get a few things. It won't take long," he assured the

little boy, who stayed silent as he often did. Julian always had to look at him to make sure he wasn't upset or scared.

This time Julian noticed that he was staring at something. It was actually someone. Following his gaze, Julian was surprised to see the temp, Rob Gerric. Their paths crossed right in front of the doors to Julian's office and Rob greeted them.

"I didn't expect to see you here so late, Mr. Brenner," Rob told him.

Julian knew that was because he didn't spend extra time at the office these days. At one time, before Danny came to live with him, Julian would often be found working late. But not any more.

"You're here late too," Julian pointed out.

"I'm helping Mrs. Lewis. Her assistant barfed up her lunch and had to go home early." When Julian made a face, Rob winked at Danny, who mouthed the word barfed. "This is my last week here, so I don't mind some extra hours," Rob added.

Julian wasn't surprised he was leaving. Rob didn't exactly fit in among the more corporate minded employees. Julian would be sorry to see him go, but then he remembered he was leaving as well.

Rob cocked his head to one side and regarded Danny with an inquisitive look. "Hey, you're new here, aren't you? What's your name?"

Danny didn't answer and Julian didn't expect him to. The little guy hardly spoke to Julian and almost never to anyone else. That's why Julian was about to answer for him when the cleaning people started up the vacuum and Danny jumped in fright. Holding his breath, his eyes wide, he clutched Julian's hand tightly.

Rob noticed his reaction and reassured him, "That's just the vacuum. See?"

Looking where Rob was pointing, Danny blinked a few times and pressed his lips together into a line as he stared at the vacuum and the man behind it. "It's red," Danny noticed, but Julian wasn't sure if he heard him say it or if he had just mouthed the words.

"And it's loud," Julian said. "Let's go in my office. It won't be so loud in there. You can sit in my chair and I'll be right back."

Going in and climbing in the swiveling chair with some difficulty, Danny looked tiny sitting in it, and Julian smiled at the sight of the tiny executive. "Here are the crayons we brought and some papers to draw on. I'll be right back. I'm going to be right out there where you can see me," Julian told him and pointed through the glass doors of his office.

The vacuum was still going, but Danny seemed OK now that he knew what it was. Choosing a red crayon, he started drawing.

Leaving Danny to his drawing, Julian went to his assistant's desk to go through a packet of information she left for him. Out of the corner

of his eye, he saw Rob going to the end of the hallway where he stopped in the doorway of Mrs. Lewis's office. With his blond head inclined, he was speaking to her and taking some notes on a legal pad. Though Rob was undeniably attractive, Julian tried not to notice his broad shoulders and beautiful, green eyes.

To force his gaze away from him, Julian focused on the packet his assistant, Ms Dover, had put together so he would have everything he needed to set up his new office right away and his work wouldn't be delayed. Busy with the papers, he jumped as someone sidled up to him.

Because of the noise of the vacuum, Julian didn't hear him approach. It was Pete Thayer, the man he wanted to avoid at all costs. And here he was only inches away from Julian, smirking right in his face.

"Packing for your escape?" Thayer taunted him while his thin lips curled into a sneer.

Without bothering to answer him, Julian drew away from him, but all he managed to do was bump into the desk. Thayer stayed right up against him, leaning close to him while Julian was trapped between the chair and the desk.

They were right in line with his office door. In case Danny was watching, Julian wasn't willing to make a scene. He endured Thayer smirking right in his face and only glared at him.

Then Julian heard Danny whimper, and turned to see him standing in the doorway of his office. To put his mind at ease, Julian plastered a reassuring smile on his face.

"I'll be right there," Julian told him, but Danny still looked very unhappy.

Out of the corner of his eye, Julian saw Thayer leering at him with an amused look in his eyes. He was enjoying the fact that Julian couldn't shove him away or tell him off in front of his little brother. Julian was furious, but helpless to do anything. All he could do was put up with Thayer until he got bored with this game.

That's what Julian thought, but then a booming voice from behind him made all of them jump. "Don't worry, little guy. Mr. Thayer is done here."

It was Rob and his words were only partly meant for Danny. They were really an order meant for Thayer. To make that clear, he forced his way between Julian and Pete Thayer. With barely veiled aggression, Rob placed one hand on the desk and leaned toward Thayer threateningly. He kept his voice even as he continued to address himself to Danny.

"Mr. Thayer is a busy guy. He doesn't have time to hang around here." Rob advanced on him until Thayer was forced to back up. He glared evilly at Rob but didn't dare to challenge him.

"Have a nice trip," Thayer said venomously to Julian and went off at a deliberately slow pace like he wanted to pretend he hadn't been chased away.

Julian immediately went over to Danny. Worried that the unpleasant scene had upset him, Julian took his hand, but Danny was doing OK.

At first Danny stared after Thayer like he wanted to make sure he was really gone then he looked up at Rob approvingly. Danny got scared again when the vacuum got louder as it came back their way.

"There goes that red vacuum again," Rob said and gave Danny a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. A vacuum only eats dirt."

Danny definitely didn't like the loud noise, but it seemed to make him forget about Thayer. And the way Rob spoke about it put him at ease somewhat.

After being so intense a moment ago, Rob was so cheerful now. When Danny looked up at him again, he introduced himself. "My name is Rob."

Surprising Julian, Danny did the same. "My name is Danny," he whispered and Rob had to lean down to hear him.

That was new. Julian had never heard Danny introduce himself to anyone. Maybe he was making progress.

"He's my little brother," Julian said feeling so proud of him.

"Nice to meet you," Rob told Danny.

"It's too noisy out here. You want to sit and draw again?" Julian said and took Danny's hand.

As Julian started to take Danny inside the office again, the little boy stopped just inside the doorway and looked back at Rob as if he thought he was supposed to come with them. Maybe he thought Rob needed to run away from the vacuum too.

"I'm OK out here," Rob assured him.

But just then Julian had an idea. "Actually, if you have a minute, I'd like to have a word with you," he said to Rob.

"Mrs. Lewis doesn't need me for a little while. I was just going to dump these in the recycling," he said and picked up a stack of papers from the edge of Ms Dover's desk. He pulled out a green paper and handed it to Danny. "You can have this one. It's green. You can make a nice paper airplane out of it."

Danny took the paper, but Julian was pretty sure he didn't know how to make a paper airplane. "I'll show you," Julian said and put his hand out for the paper.

Instead of giving it to him, Danny looked up at Rob as if he needed his permission to hand over the precious, green paper.

"It's good to know how to make an airplane. You never know when you might need to fly somewhere," Rob told him. At a nod from him, Danny let Julian have the paper.

While Julian folded the paper, Danny watched closely. He then took the plane and looked it over. Next Julian showed him how to throw it.

Rob left some more colorful papers with him, but Danny spent most of his time trying to make the green paper plane fly. They left him to it and stepped just outside Julian's office.

Now that they had a moment away from Danny, Rob didn't hesitate to bring up what just happened with Thayer. "That was a real creepy move Thayer pulled on you. Are you OK?"

"You don't need to worry about me, but thank you for what you did. And Danny appreciated it too," Julian said and looked through the office door. Inside, Danny was playing and occasionally checking to make sure Julian was still there and that everything was all right.

"I think your little brother was coming out here to rescue you. But I'm surprised Thayer didn't threaten to sic security on me since I'm just a lowly temp and he's the top executive around here," Rob said. "He still might, I guess."

Julian doubted it. "I don't think Thayer wants to have to explain what just happened here. But what about your job? Thayer is in charge while Mr. Upton is away. That's going to make things very uncomfortable for you."

"Only until the end of the week. I was on my way out anyway," Rob said. He didn't seem very concerned.

"You won't leave here with a good recommendation from him," Julian pointed out.

"I'll be fine. What about what he just did to you? He was all over you." Rob frowned, some of his anger from before returning.

"I'm on my way out of here too. Starting next week, I'll be telecommuting from my family house out in the country."

"Sounds nice," Rob said.

"Do you have another job lined up?" Julian asked.

"I'll figure something out." Rob tried for a confident smile but it turned into a grimace.

That meant Julian could make his offer. "I might have a job for you, but it would be out of town, I'm afraid. And it would be temporary. It does come with room and board. I'll need help setting up my new office and with work in general. Would something like that interest you?"

"It might. I don't mind a short-term move right now," Rob said. "Where would we be going?"

As he was telling him about it, Julian was pretty sure that Rob wouldn't be thrilled with the work or the living situation. "I'm taking Danny to my family home in Peach Tree. That's my hometown. I'll be working from there. With an assistant to help me, I would be able to spend more time with Danny. Your job might involve running some

errands, but it would be mostly helping me in the office. It's a big house, so you would have plenty of privacy."

Though he nodded, Rob didn't look sure. Julian decided they could have a trial run. "If you have time, you can give me a hand with packing for the move. It might help you decide and we can discuss the specifics. How does that sound?"

"That might be a good idea." Just then Rob got a text. "That's Mrs. Lewis. She needs me."

"Contact me about the details," Julian told him and handed over his card.

"OK. Thanks," Rob said.

As Rob was about to go, he poked his head in Julian's office and waved to Danny. "It was nice meeting you, Danny," Rob told him with a smile and Danny waved back.

Going into his office to sit behind his desk, Julian made a few more paper planes while Danny watched closely. Danny then threw them around the office and chased them. A few came Julian's way and he tried to catch them but his mind was elsewhere.

He was thinking about that house on Peach Tree Hill and about Rob working for him. Rob had just left and Julian was already having second thoughts about offering him the job.

On thinking about it, Julian had to wonder how much Danny's reaction to Rob had influenced him to make the offer. The few words the little boy spoke to him sounded to Julian like a ringing endorsement, but he couldn't let that sway him.

It wasn't something to disregard either. Rob's rapport with Danny did matter since he would be living at the house. That was something that Julian had his doubts about as well, and not just because it would be a challenge to have such an incredibly attractive guy under the same roof with him. Julian also questioned if that house was really the right place to take Danny.

It would be more peaceful, much quieter than here where the noise of traffic always reminded Danny of his accident. Still, Julian never planned to go back to Peach Tree. For Danny's sake, he would do anything. The gloomy memories Julian had of the house in Peach Tree shouldn't affect Danny. If Julian could just bury his distaste for the place, everything would be fine.

Of course he would also have a good-looking guy there to distract him. If Julian felt any burgeoning attraction to Rob, he would have to bury that too. He was pretty sure that Ms Dover said that Rob was gay. Considering how dependable and efficient office gossip was, Rob probably knew Julian was gay as well. In any case, Julian saw no reason to bring it up. Neither of their sex lives had anything to do

with this job.

Focusing on what did matter, he remembered that Rob was recommended by Upton Investments' clients, Mr. and Mrs. Wells. In order to check his references more thoroughly, Julian called Mrs. Wells.

As soon as Julian brought up Rob's name, she only had good things to say. "You can't go wrong hiring Rob. He is very helpful and responsible. When the triplets were little, he and his sister kept them from destroying the house. They were very good with them. Rob also helped me at the office when Trish, my assistant, was having her baby. He is very hard-working."

"That's good to hear. Thank you," Julian told her.

It all sounded good, but he didn't have to make a final decision until the trial run when Rob helped him pack up. That way he would know if they could work together closely, and he could also see Rob interact with Danny some more in case his positive reaction was just a fluke.

Of course Julian's own reaction was pretty damn positive. The way Rob stepped in when he didn't know how to push back against Thayer without upsetting Danny – that was enough to win over Julian. Add to that his green eyes and his warm smile, and Julian had to wonder why he really wanted to hire Rob.

Chapter 2

The building where Julian Brenner lived was a lot like the office building where he worked. It was all metal and glass with everything looking untouched by human hands. Rob had no trouble picturing Mr. Brenner living in a place like this, but not that little brother of his. Maybe that's why he was moving, and not just because of the situation with that Thayer creep.

Rob had arrived there after work and hoped to have a firm job offer after he was done. As he went up in the elevator, which was as smooth as butter, Rob thought about the creaking, lurching elevator at his own building. Not that it would be his building for much longer. He had to be out of there soon.

Rob had made the mistake of messing around with his 'straight' roommate. When Craig had a freak out and tried to kick him out, Rob told him he was taking two weeks to find another place. He wasn't about to let that two-faced idiot push him around.

But time was running out, and until Mr. Brenner offered him this job, Rob was looking at a future with no job and no place to live. Working for Mr. Brenner wasn't yet a sure thing from the sound of it, and it wasn't the kind of job he was looking for. Still, it was better than nothing, which is what he had lined up so far.

Living at Mr. Brenner's house in the country might not be so bad either. Sure it might be kind of awkward, but Rob could save some money. First he had to make sure not to blow it. And also keep dirty thoughts out of his head.

That wasn't easy. He was on the doorstep of Mr. Brenner's apartment, ringing the doorbell and telling himself to be the perfect employee. But as soon as Mr. Brenner opened the door, dirty thoughts came flooding in.

He couldn't help it. Julian Brenner was smoking hot. Rob took in those soft brown eyes, dark hair, and a perfectly trimmed beard on a serious face. Below that were broad shoulders and a slim but toned body and everything else that Rob had to pretend not to notice.

Rob averted his eyes and spotted Danny hiding behind his big brother.

"Who do I see over there? Hi, Danny. Are we going to be packing today?" Rob asked him.

Danny nodded.

"You want to say hi to Rob?" Julian encouraged him gently, like he wasn't sure he would. But his little brother did him proud.

"Hi, Rob," Danny said under his breath and tucked in his chin shyly.

Taking off his jacket and going inside the apartment, Rob could tell

that Mr. Brenner's style was minimalist and traditional, but now there were toys perched on side tables and armrests. So it seemed that Mr. Brenner had allowed his little brother to make the whole apartment his playground.

Aside from that, packing boxes were already set out, and some of them were half full. Leaving his big brother's side, Danny went over to stand in the doorway of a colorfully decorated bedroom.

"I told Danny that we would start with some of his things," Mr. Brenner said while showing Rob where to hang up his jacket.

"We're starting with the most important stuff," Rob said to Danny. The little boy looked shy whenever he spoke to him but also bright-eyed and eager.

Running into his room with Rob and Mr. Brenner following after him, Danny went straight to a hook on the wall where a yellow baseball cap was hanging. Taking it off the hook, he showed the cap to Rob with a look of solemn pride.

"Is that the most important thing?" Rob asked him.

Danny nodded.

"Don't worry. We won't forget the yellow cap," Mr. Brenner assured him. "But we don't need to pack it. You can wear it on the trip."

"It must be special," Rob said.

"Julian got it for me," Danny said in his small voice.

"It was the first thing I ever bought him," Mr. Brenner said with a smile and a wistful look in his brown eyes.

Rob knew from talk at the office that Mr. Brenner and Danny were each other's only family, and that they only recently found each other. That must be why Mr. Brenner seemed to be wrapped up in sadness even when he smiled.

"Should we put something in those boxes?" Rob asked bringing over two boxes that sat empty. Danny agreed. Of course all he was interested in packing were his toys.

While he rummaged in his toy box, Rob noticed that the boxes weren't marked. "We should write Danny's name on here, right? Mr. Brenner?"

When Mr. Brenner didn't say anything, Rob wondered if he was making a bad impression. But maybe he was just lost in thought. Mr. Brenner was looking around Danny's room with a faraway look in his eyes.

Rob was about to look around for a marker, when he felt Danny tug at his sleeve. He motioned for Rob to lean down, and then he whispered. "He has another name."

"He does?" Rob said and he and Mr. Brenner locked eyes for a moment. Those gorgeous, brown eyes were hard to look away from, but Rob forced his gaze away somehow and gave his full attention to

Danny.

"His name is Julian," Danny confided to him.

"I see," Rob said, but he was pretty sure Mr. Brenner didn't want him to call him by his first name.

"You can call me Julian if you want, but it's completely up to you," he said letting Rob decide how much professional distance he wanted to keep between them.

Rob decided to let Danny weigh in. "Julian is better, right?"

Danny nodded emphatically, and the issue was settled.

"All right. I'll call you Julian," Rob said but then he caught a flustered look cross his face. Wasn't it OK? As Rob watched, he saw Julian's mouth quirk into a smile for just a second. It was so fleeting, Rob might have imagined it, but the thumping of his heart told him he hadn't. Julian. He did like saying that name.

With Rob and Julian's help, Danny managed to pack more than just his toys. When they were done, Julian looked around the room and wondered, "Do we have everything?"

More of Danny's things were scattered around the apartment. Once those were gathered and boxed up, Julian decided it was time for his kid brother to take a break and took him to the kitchen.

When Julian came back, he offered Rob a bottle of water. "Did you want anything else?" he asked, but Rob shook his head.

"I'm fine. So what's next?"

"Since Danny is occupied with a snack and some coloring, you can help me pack my office," Julian said as he led the way through the spacious living area, past the packing boxes and toward the office on the other side of the apartment.

"I'm surprised you don't have movers doing this for you," Rob said as they stepped into his office. It was a mess of binders, boxes and files right now.

"I wanted to ease Danny into this move. That's why I'm having him help with packing his stuff," Julian explained.

Rob nodded. "That makes sense."

"He's been through some trauma. This past spring, he was in a serious car accident. He wasn't hurt badly, but it took time to get him out of the wreckage. Since then he doesn't like cars and all the noise from the street. That's why I want to move somewhere quieter. And my family house in Peach Tree is as quiet as it gets."

"Poor kid. How are you getting there?" Rob wondered as he realized the trip might be tough to take for the little guy.

"Driving. It will be a challenge. These days Danny does well enough on a short drive, so I plan to stop as often as I need to," Julian said. "Do you have a car?"

"No," Rob said. He had an old Honda for a while, but he couldn't

afford to keep fixing it so he had to give it up.

"Then you can drive there with us, if you don't mind," Julian said and once again Rob noticed that his eyes had this power over him. They made him forget where he was or what he was doing. It took all of his willpower to get his mind to focus.

"No problem," Rob said. Julian was making it sound like the job was his, but he hadn't actually said so. He was so reserved. Rob had trouble reading him.

"And moving for a while isn't a problem?" Julian asked.

"The place where I'm living now is temporary, so I wouldn't mind a change of scenery." Rob wasn't about to get into the whole deal with his roommate, but the thought of getting away did appeal to him.

"That's good. I already checked your references with Mrs. Wells. She said you were good with her kids."

"Right. The triplets," Rob said remembering how terrifying they were. "That was me and my sister. It was a while ago. We were babysitting them as a team. I wouldn't have survived it without backup."

"You're smiling, so I guess it wasn't a complete nightmare. Would you mind doing that kind of thing again and helping me with Danny?" Julian asked.

"It's no problem. Danny is a really nice kid," Rob said and Julian looked relieved.

"I'm glad. I think he'll like having you along with us for the trip," Julian said. "And I want to bring Danny's stuff with us, so he can feel at home right away."

"He doesn't seem too nervous about the move," Rob said as Julian handed him a stack of files and pointed out which box he should put them in.

"That's thanks to you being here," Julian said. "But I'm not sure how he'll react once we're on the road. Before he came to live with me, Danny was in foster care. No one knew who his father was so he had two different foster families after he lost his mom. The car crash happened when he was being transported to a new foster home. The driver and the social worker who were with him were badly hurt. They didn't make it. Danny was trapped with them in the car for hours before the emergency crew got to him and got him out."

"God. I'm so sorry. That's terrible," Rob said. He couldn't imagine such a small child having to go through something like that.

"What happened might have been horrific, but I'm not sure how much of it he remembers. His therapist can't get him to talk about it," Julian said. "He has made a lot of progress though. Right after the accident, he was in such bad shape. That's why someone at social services worked extra hard to track down any relatives. They found

out who his father was though his name wasn't on Danny's birth certificate. But my father is deceased. Then they contacted me."

"It's good that he has you now," Rob said.

"I just wish I had known about Danny sooner. And I hope he'll like the place where we're moving," Julian said with a sigh, like he had misgivings.

His worried look made Rob think of another reason why Julian might be moving. "So the move is for Danny's sake, or does it have something to do with Pete Thayer and getting the hell away from him," Rob said a little too roughly, but he had come to really hate that guy since he saw him hassling Julian.

At first Julian didn't say anything. Maybe he was offended by his tone. "Thayer hasn't given you any trouble at the office, has he?" Julian finally asked, but to Rob it seemed that he was trying to deflect him.

"Haven't even seen him. I bet he can't be bothered with a nobody like me," Rob said then he pressed on, not ready to drop the subject. "Shouldn't you report him to HR?"

Julian shook his head and looked away. "I don't want to complicate my life right now. You might not have heard, but he's married to Mr. Upton's niece. On top of that, Mr. Upton is still recovering from his bypass, and while he is gone, Thayer is in charge. It's not a good time."

"Right," Rob said and clamped his mouth shut. Maybe he was being too pushy and Julian would change his mind about hiring him. But the way Thayer had menaced Julian in front of Danny really pissed him off.

Just as Rob was thinking he went too far, Julian told him, "We leave early Saturday. Is that all right with you?"

"It's fine," Rob said right away. "So the job is mine?"

"Yes," Julian told him simply and Rob let out a relieved breath.

That made Julian smile, but then he turned more businesslike as they went back to packing. Danny came over to watch the action from the doorway. To put him to work, Rob handed him anything that needed to be thrown away and he got to drop it into the wastebasket.

By the time they were done, it was a little past Danny's bedtime, and Julian was ready to take him to bed. First he got to say good night to Rob.

"This was a busy day," Rob said and Danny nodded. "You did good work. Good night and I'll see you soon."

"Good night, Rob," Danny said sweetly and waved to him as he went off toward his bedroom while holding Julian's hand.

Rob was left to check that nothing got left behind and to make sure

the boxes were labeled like they should be. Unpacking was going to be his job, and he would have no one to curse at but himself if he couldn't find something.

Julian didn't come back for a while, so Rob kept busy. Once he did get back, Rob was pretty sure he would send him home. That gave him a pang of regret, like when a good time was about to end.

Since when was packing a good time? Rob needed to stop thinking of Julian as a good-looking guy and think of him only as his boss.

But then Julian appeared at the door of his office, and Rob knew it was hopeless. As soon as he saw Julian, all he wanted to do was grab hold of him and tumble with him to the floor.

Chapter 3

Back from helping Julian with packing, Rob had lined up a job and a place to live for a while. Julian even emailed him to offer the job formally and set down the particulars in writings. The pay and his duties were all outlined as well as the living arrangements. He would have a choice of one of three rooms with his own bathroom and the use of one other room as his living space. Must be a big house.

Now that it was all official and finalized, Rob decided to call his sister, Christie, and tell her about his job. That was much better than calling her up to ask if he could move in with her for a while.

Until now, Rob didn't want to talk about the job in case it fell through. He didn't exactly trust his luck, but now he was ready to give Christie his news.

"You're calling, not texting? You have some kind of big news? Is it about a job?" Christie asked him before he could tell her anything.

Since she was being so pushy, Rob told her, "I have news. I'm going back to babysitting."

"Ha ha," she said, not believing him. "Talk sense, Rob."

Rob got a little more serious. "Actually I'll be a personal assistant, but that's what you get for not letting me tell you in my own way."

"You know I get anxious when you're between jobs," she admitted and Rob understood.

After their mom lost her job, she sank into a depression and then they lost her. What happened still haunted both of them as well as their dad.

"I'll be working for a guy from Upton Investments. My new boss will need me to look after his little brother now and then. It's not here though. He's moving himself and the kid to his home town, and I'll be going with them. It's a small place called Peach Tree. What I see online looks nice."

"What? You're moving?" Christie asked, not sounding happy.

"It's a live-in thing," Rob told her.

Christie was even more doubtful as she said, "So you and your boss are going to be roomies?"

Considering the kind of luck he had with his last roommate, that seemed like a jinx. "It's temporary. It will help me save up and figure out my next move."

She still wasn't sold on the idea. "But a small town? Really, Rob?"

"I don't have to love it. Like I said, it's temporary. Julian Brenner is a little uptight. Hopefully I won't hate working for him, but his little brother is adorable. Maybe it will even out." Rob didn't mention that Julian was also very hot.

He didn't need to though. Christie had already looked him up online. "That's what he looks like. Now I see what's going on," she practically yelled into the phone. "He is why you took this job."

"Are you looking at a pic of him with or without the beard?" Rob asked, admitting to nothing.

"With. Do not under any circumstances fall for this guy," she ordered him. "Now give me your new address."

Christie was kind of bossy and a little overprotective, but Rob couldn't blame her. She was his big sister, and she pretty much single handedly held them all together when they lost their mom.

Finished talking to Christie, Rob sat against the headboard of his narrow bed and thought about Danny and Julian. The way that little guy looked to his older brother was really touching. There was no margin for error when taking care of a traumatized kid, but Julian had taken on the responsibility. But was Rob ready to enter their world? What if he did the wrong thing or said the wrong thing?

When he thought about Danny, Rob wanted to do whatever he could for him. Even with the added pressure, he couldn't even consider backing out. But honestly, he didn't know what he was really getting himself into.

On the day of the trip to Peach Tree, Rob woke up early and blinked at the gray, washed out light of the morning. Looking around his room and then the rest of the apartment, Rob knew he wouldn't be sorry to never see this place again.

Christie texted him to say how sorry she was she couldn't see him off. It did feel kind of lonely. Their dad had only recently moved in with his girlfriend in Oregon. She had her daughter and her kids living with her. It was a full house, but they all seemed to be getting along. Still Dad was lamenting that he, Rob and Christie had all scattered.

His call caught Rob just as he was going out the door. "I wish I was there to see you off," his dad said and Rob laughed.

"Christie was just saying that too." Rob told him.

"They should have a few good barbeque places out there. Keep your eyes peeled," his dad instructed him.

"I will."

"And take good care of yourself. Call or text if you need anything. You know I'll drop everything if you need me. You know that right?" his dad said so earnestly that Rob had to choke back tears.

"I know. And the same goes for me."

They hung up and Rob stepped out into the crisp air of an autumn morning. Inhaling deeply, he tried to clear his head of the past, but that wasn't easy. Not until he pictured Julian, his serious eyes, his

sensual mouth, his beautiful hands, his unconsciously elegant movements. That's what trouble looks like – gorgeous, perfectly tailored and a little bit sad.

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Dawn was just starting to break, but both Danny and Julian were already up and ready.

"We're going to go somewhere where it's quieter," Julian told Danny as they finished breakfast and went into the living room. All the furniture was still there, but everything else was gone and on its way to Peach Tree.

Stopping in the middle of the room, Danny looked around like he wasn't sure if this was the same place. Danny wasn't as uneasy as the first time he came here, but he never got used to the noise of traffic. The angry honking of horns, tires screeching, sirens blaring at all hours – they were all sounds Julian had blocked out a long time ago, even welcomed as reminders that he wasn't in Peach Tree any more.

Now he was afraid that Danny might hate it there too. Packing had distracted him, but Danny didn't seem too thrilled about the move now that it was about to happen. With all their things in boxes, the apartment looked so different, and that made Danny feel a little insecure.

With Julian next to him, Danny was kneeling backwards on the couch and looking out the window into a pale blue-gray sky. A crane was swinging its arm over the tops of distant buildings and Danny watched it closely.

"There won't be tall buildings like these where we're going, but there will be lots of trees," Julian told him to try and make him look forward to the move.

Danny turned his serious, brown eyes to him then he nodded. Julian saw the trust that the little boy had in him. That's why he had to try anything he could to make his life better and just hope he might like Peach Tree.

He knew without a doubt that Rob would hate it over there – that lonely house, no place to have fun anywhere nearby. Rob was too good-looking and dynamic for small town life. Idly Julian wondered what kind of social life someone like Rob might be leaving behind.

"Rob is going with us," he reminded Danny. "He'll be helping me with my work."

Danny turned to look at him again. "I wanna help."

"All right. You'll help me too," Julian said with a smile.

Danny was such a sweet, little guy but so quiet. Julian didn't get to hear his voice often enough. That's why he was surprised when he

spoke to Rob so readily. Rob was a surprise too. Turning easily from friendly to intimidating when the circumstances called for it, he wasn't easy to figure out.

"Rob is going to be here soon," Julian told Danny after he saw a text from him. "He's on time."

Leaning over, Danny stared out the window toward the street far below like he expected to see him arrive from way up there. At the sound of the door chime, Julian got up.

"Rob is here?" Danny said as he clambered down off the couch and ran to the door to wait for him to open the door.

As soon as Julian opened the door to Rob, Danny announced, "You're on time."

"I guess so," Rob said and then smiled at Julian, knowing he was the one who must have said something like that. "Good morning, Julian. Good morning, Danny."

After greeting Rob, Julian looked down at Danny and prompted him to say good morning.

"Me too. Good morning, Rob," Danny said in a small, shy voice.

Rob didn't even get the chance to put down his bags before they got on their way. All of the things they were taking along were already down in the car. They all went into the elevator together, where Danny clutched Julian's hand tightly.

Danny didn't like being in the parking garage either, and Rob noticed. "Want to help me carry my bag?" he asked Danny.

"It's too big," Danny told him.

"We'll carry it together," Rob said and let him hold on to the bag.

That did the trick, and Julian found himself smiling at the two of them working as a team. But then he got distracted. Even through Rob's jacket, Julian could see the flex of his biceps. It wasn't easy to tell himself to look away and not to admire the man.

Julian's Mercedes SUV was loaded down with a lot of Danny's things plus office equipment and supplies. They still managed to find room for Rob's duffel bag and backpack. With his things in the car, Julian suddenly felt how real this was – the move and Rob coming along. Oddly, having Rob with them didn't add to the strain like Julian would have expected. Maybe he was a nice distraction.

Julian was buckling Danny into his car seat when Rob leaned into the front passenger side. Going over to him, Julian took him aside. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to sit in the back with Danny so you can keep a close eye on him and keep him occupied, or let me know if he gets upset."

"What if I drive and you sit with him?" Rob offered.

"You're new and more interesting to him, so I think you will be able to hold his attention better. But we can take turns later," Julian said.

Though he seemed skeptical, Rob agreed and Julian gave him Danny's favorite book, *Super Strong Little Bee*. "He likes for me to read him this book when he gets scared."

Flipping through, Rob nodded at the story of a little super strong bee lifting various heavy things in order to help other insects and animals and making friends along the way, nothing too complicated. Danny liked it and that's all that mattered.

Soon they were driving away, and Rob was keeping Danny company. Because he had to be able to stop on short notice, Julian planned to avoid the highways and toll roads. That meant their trip would take longer, but it would also be more scenic.

"Are we going far away?" Danny asked as they got on one of the surface roads out of town.

"Not too far. We're going to a nice place," Rob told him in that cheerful way of his. "But on the way, we have to keep an eye out for animals. If we see any cows or horses, we have to count them, and we have to wave to them."

"I can count to eleven," Danny told him. He seemed OK, but then a big truck rumbled past and Danny started to breathe too fast.

"That was a big truck, but it's gone now," Julian said as he slowed to make sure the truck passed them.

"You want to hold my hand?" Rob asked Danny.

"A little," Danny said.

"OK. Here you go. You're a brave guy, you know," Rob told him.

In the rearview mirror, Julian saw as Danny nodded. He worked so hard not to be scared, it broke Julian's heart.

Chapter 4

Rob hadn't expected that he would be the one to sit in the back with Danny and keep him calm. It was almost like Julian had more confidence in Rob than in himself. That man was a puzzle.

From the back seat, Rob had a good view of Julian's attractive profile. Most of the time, Rob was preoccupied with Danny, but he glanced toward the front now and then and enjoyed the view.

The drive was going well so far. Danny got scared sometimes, but not so badly that Julian had to pull over. Rob did his best to keep him distracted with things they saw along the roadside. When they drove through a stretch of roadway with only drying fields alongside them, Rob decided to tell Danny about his own childhood.

"When I was a kid, we went on road trips so we could have ourselves a cheap vacation. It was me, my sister, Christie, my mom and my dad. My sister and I wanted to stop everywhere. My dad had a bumper sticker that said, 'I break for barbeque.' That tells you everything you need to know." Rob said but Danny had on a confused expression. "That means he liked meat. Mom liked any place that made for a good family picture."

Mentioning her, Rob got wistful. She loved to compose a perfect shot then she would stare at the screen and smile. They had to work hard to get her in front of the camera though. That's why she was often missing from family pictures even before she was gone for good.

"What happened then?" Danny asked and Rob realized he had gone quiet.

"Right. We would find good places to eat or just have pie or ice cream. We would visit fun places and buy souvenirs."

"Souvenirs are little things that remind you of the places you visited," Julian said from the front. "And speaking of places to eat. We should stop somewhere for lunch. There is a place coming up soon. After we go over the bridge, it will be on our right."

Julian must have planned this stop. He was the opposite of the way Rob's dad had been. Dad was all about spontaneity. He wanted to discover new places, no advance research, no looking at reviews. Mom went along with it, though she did sneak a look at some maps so they wouldn't get hopelessly lost. It tore at the wound in Rob's heart to think how indulgent she had been, and at the end, how quietly she sank into her depression.

As they neared a roadside diner, Rob forced himself to shake off thoughts of the past. He needed to be cheerful for Danny's sake, and for Julian's sake too. Julian wasn't exactly chipper either, though he always had a smile for his little brother.

"This place looks nice," Rob said as they got out of the car in front of Dorothy's Diner with its blue roof and pictures of food painted on the windows.

"They have burgers," Danny said seeing one painted on a window in front.

"I guess they do," Rob said as they went through the doors and looked around for a free booth.

Spotting the dessert stand, Rob was about to say something about the mint chocolate chip pie behind glass that was right at Danny's eyelevel, but then thought better of it.

"Can he have dessert?" Rob leaned in to whisper the question in Julian's ear and he felt like time stopped. Julian smelled good. His skin, all of him would taste incredible – Rob just knew it. Being so near him, Rob had to hold his breath to get himself back under control. He almost forgot what he just asked Julian.

"He can have something sweet," Julian said then he got Danny's attention. "Look what Rob discovered."

Danny looked at the dessert display eagerly then up at Julian.

"Yes, you get to have one," Julian told him and led the way to an empty booth.

"And I found something I'd like. They have a Ruben on the menu," Rob said and pointed at two sandwiches going out on a tray. They reminded him of a deli he used to go to when he was in college.

"Order anything you like. Lunch is on me, of course," Julian said as he let Danny scoot in ahead of him into a booth.

"Thanks," Rob said and sat across from Julian and Danny. He vowed not to gaze at Julian like they were on a date, but it was hard not to appreciate the man when he was right there in front of him in all his bearded, handsome and refined glory. He was like some kind of dream date.

What was it he just vowed not to do? Oh, damn it.

It was like that all through lunch. With Danny being so quiet, it was easy for Rob to let his attention drift to Julian and his beautiful, brown eyes.

He had to cut that out. Noticing how Danny was eyeing his Ruben, Rob told him, "It's a grown-up sandwich, but you can try a bite if you want and if your brother says it's OK."

Julian nodded and Rob cut off a small piece for him and a bigger piece for Julian. Julian started to shake his head. But on seeing that his big brother was having some too, Danny smiled. Now Julian couldn't refuse.

"Thank you," he said to Rob.

"Thank you," Danny repeated after him.

The brothers each had a bite, and Julian said, "It's good."

But Danny frowned. "It's for 'growned-ups'," he declared.

Rob laughed. "Yes, it is."

After lunch, their waitress brought over a slice of mint chocolate chip pie that had mesmerized Danny a little while ago. Danny was about to take a little bit on his fork when he stopped and looked at Rob and Julian, neither of whom got any pie. "Wanna bite?" Danny asked them.

Rob gave him a big smile. "Not me, but thank you for offering."

Julian said no as well. "You go ahead and enjoy."

"It's a kid pie," Danny concluded as he started eating in a clumsy way. The spoon Julian substituted for his fork was held in his fist, so he got pie on his nose and chin and one cheek. Julian wiped him a few times but his face just wouldn't stay clean.

In a corner behind them, there was some kind of video game. Rob didn't pay much attention to it until a group of kids went over and huddled around it. Suddenly the kids all yelled, and Danny got startled. He huddled against Julian and buried his face in the crook of his arm.

As he held on to him and stroked his hair, Julian told him. "It's OK."

"It's just some kids. They're playing a video game," Rob told him.

That made Danny perk up, and he craned his neck to try and see. Julian kept his arm around him anyway. He was so protective.

Stepping outside the diner, Rob pulled his arms over his head, stretching and enjoying the mix of cool air and sunshine. Eyes on him, Danny then lifted his arms and stretched too.

"That was a good lunch. Thank you for treating me," Rob said to Danny and Julian.

"You're welcome," Julian said to him.

At the car, Rob stopped Julian before he could take a seat behind the wheel. "Let's switch. Let me drive the rest of the way. You sit in the back with Danny. What do you say?" Rob put out his hand for the keys, and Julian handed them over.

"Thank you," he said and got in the back with his little brother.

"Rob is driving," Danny said, seeing him at the wheel. "You know where to go?" Maybe having Rob drive them made him uneasy.

"The GPS and your brother will tell me which way to go," Rob told him. "Like this, your big brother gets to sit with you, so you guys can have fun together."

Danny gave Julian a small smile. They drove on past the yellowed stalks of a cornfield and Julian pointed out various landmarks to

Danny and also helped Rob navigate.

As they got close, Julian told both him and Danny. "We're going to see a hill soon. First there will be a sign that says Peach Tree Hill. Then we'll see the hill with all the peach trees. That's how we'll know we're almost there."

A hill came into view, just like Julian said. One side of it was yellow and orange with dry leaves on what must have been the peach trees. The other side of the hill sloped down covered with yellowing grass. Julian pointed toward the grassy side of the hill and told him to go that way.

"So we're going up the hill," Rob said as he followed the road that meandered up the hillside.

"We are. The house is on the western slope. Turn here," Julian said.

That's where Rob saw a sign that read "Private Road. Authorized Vehicles Only." There was a gate but it stood open.

"Mrs. York got the place ready before she left for her trip. She's the orchard attendant. She keeps the tourists in line, and she also takes care of the house. The house is at the end of this road," Julian told them.

And what a house. The driveway circled around and they parked in front of what could only be called a mansion. The windows were tall and narrow and covered with heavy, wooden shutters. Wide front steps led to a big front door under a portico. Rob couldn't believe he would be living there.

He was busy taking it all in, but he still noticed that Julian was subdued. He only looked at the house briefly then turned away to unbuckle Danny from his car seat. Julian put on a more cheerful face for him, but his dark eyes were still troubled. This wasn't a happy homecoming for him.

Chapter 5

Seeing the house again, Julian felt his misgivings return. How could this be the right place for Danny? The house loomed over him and he felt like it would crush him.

"This is a big house, isn't it?" Rob was saying to Danny while Julian was lost in thought. He turned to see Danny climbing out of the car and looking around curiously.

Taking Danny's lead, Julian told him, "We're going to live here. And there are lots of places to play all around." As Julian gestured at the countryside, Danny gave him a cautious smile. Wide-open spaces didn't hold much appeal for him, not yet anyway, but he seemed ready enough to go and see the house.

They would be going inside now and Julian dreaded it. Approaching the house gave him a heavy feeling. He was glad Rob was there to lighten the mood.

"We had a pretty good road trip, didn't we?" Rob said to Danny as they went up the steps. "Julian showed you a lot of good stuff along the way."

Stopped on the doorstep of his childhood home, Julian felt as small as he did back then with the front doors towering over him. "This house belonged to my grandfather and he left it to me," Julian said as he unlocked the front doors and willed his hand not to shake.

"This is Julian's house," Rob explained in a way Danny was more likely to understand.

That made Danny look up at the place more cheerfully, that is until Julian pushed on the door handle and opened the door into near total darkness.

Out here, the sun had been shining, glinting off the fall leaves. Where they were going, the only light was coming from the open front door. Shrouded in darkness, the house was gloomy and cold. What were they doing here? This was a mistake.

Danny was already afraid. He didn't want to go inside the dark house any more than Julian did. The little boy stayed close by his side, but Rob went right in.

"I should open the shutters, right?" Rob said as he flipped on the light switch and found the foyer lighting kind of weak.

The double doors to the living room were right across the hall from the front door. After a vague nod from Julian, Rob went across the hall into the living room and pulled the shutters open one by one so that light flooded the old place. Staring straight into the living room, Julian blinked at the bright sunlight streaming in.

In all the time he had lived there, he had never seen all the shutters

standing open like that. When his grandfather was in charge, that would have been unthinkable. "The sun will fade everything and ruin it," he used to say.

"That's much better," Rob proclaimed and Danny agreed.

Julian felt a small tug as his little brother pulled on his hand, wanting to go further in. Noticing that Julian was still rooted to the spot, Danny turned a questioning gaze up at him. Smiling down at him, Julian let the little boy lead him inside. Right now, he was the brave one.

"I think he wants to have a look around," Rob said.

To prove him right, Danny let go of Julian's hand and cautiously went to Rob who was standing at the double doors. With Rob by his side, Danny went into the big living room.

Holding on tightly to Rob's hand, Danny was peering all around. After getting a good look at everything, he let go of Rob's hand so he could explore on his own. Danny started stalking his way between hulking pieces of furniture like he was stalking through a jungle, not a stodgy, old living room with a gland piano on one end and a fireplace on the other.

He stopped in front of a side table with a small statue of a knight with a lance and stared at it intently. Next he discovered the porcelain busts of classical composers lined up in a row. Then Danny got nose to nose with bronze sculptures of two hunting dogs.

"There's a lot of good stuff here," Rob said and Danny nodded.

It was strange for Julian to watch Danny getting acquainted with all the things he knew so well from his own childhood. The way he looked at those things was different though.

When he looked over his shoulder at Julian and Rob, Danny didn't do it because he was waiting to get yelled at. And he wasn't just checking to make sure they were still there either. There was a puzzled expression on his face, like he wanted someone to explain to him what these things were for. Were they toys?

"This is a good one," Julian told Danny as he pointed out an elk carved out of wood. The elk stood proud and lifelike on a shelf, and Julian was warned never to touch him. But as Danny came forward, Julian handed the elk to him. Taking it from him, the little boy held it reverently then looked up at Julian.

"You can play with him," Julian told him and Danny smiled and gingerly touched the antlers.

Noticing that he was still wearing his jacket, Julian remembered they should have the heat on. Leaving Danny alone for a little bit, he went to turn it on and showed Rob the panel under the stairs.

"So far so good, right?" Rob said to him. Obviously he knew Julian needed to be reassured.

For a second, Julian considered putting on a front, pretending nothing was going on with him, but there was something about Rob that made it hard to put on an act with him. Julian nodded and didn't try to hide his troubled expression. "This isn't my favorite place in the world, but as long as Danny likes it, that's all that matters."

They went back to find, Danny looking anxiously toward the door.

"We're back," Julian announced.

"With those heavy, wooden blinds open, I can see this is a nice house," Rob said. "And look at the tchotchkes, Danny. There's some neat stuff here."

Danny was already showing all the various things to his wooden elk. The bronze statue of some general on horseback held his attention then he moved on to a pair of vases painted with colorful birds.

"Looks like he's having fun," Rob said as he and Julian strolled to the windows and he took in the view.

While Danny made friends with the knickknacks, Rob noticed him try to pick up a pewter lion. "I don't know if you're allowed to play with that," Rob told him and looked over at Julian.

"As long as he can't hurt himself, he can play with anything he wants," Julian said, but Danny only petted the lion.

Rob was surprised to hear that. "Really? At least some of this stuff has to be valuable."

"Probably, but to me everything here is just a reminder that my grandfather valued things more than people," Julian said as they went over to the last window and he leaned into the corner.

"Sorry. Then I guess you don't mind if Danny breaks everything in sight," Rob said archly but kept his voice low so Danny wouldn't get any ideas.

Julian chuckled, but he couldn't see Danny being so destructive. He was such a gentle kid. "He won't do that. But if there's any accidental breakage, I won't be heartbroken."

They went on to the dining room with its huge oval table in an oversized room that was obviously meant for hosting formal dinner parties. Julian only remembered a few of them and only vaguely. He had always been told to stay in his room and be quiet.

"Big table," Danny said. At first he just peered into the big room though Rob had opened the shutters. Danny hung back until Julian flipped the light switch and the huge, sparkling chandelier came on. Now Danny went in and started jumping the wooden elk from one chair to the other all around the big table.

"I knew this room was good for something," Julian said and smiled watching Danny circle the table.

"I guess this house is like a playground to him," Rob said then looked

over at Julian. "It should have been that way for you too when you were little."

Looking at Rob and the serious cast to his green eyes, Julian could tell that he had already figured out it wasn't that way for him. It was restrictive and punishing. Don't touch. Don't speak. Stay in your room until I say you can come out. And sometimes total darkness.

Wrapped up in gloomy thoughts, Julian hardly noticed that they had moved on. A set of open doors had drawn them the other way instead of continuing toward the kitchen.

"A library, wow," Rob said impressed with the large room with its walls of bookshelves.

All Julian could think about was how he was told he had to ask for each book he wanted to read and how often his grandfather said, "No. This is pure nonsense. You don't need to fill your head with trash like this." Usually the book in question would disappear from the library. History books were the only ones his grandfather approved of, preferably military history.

"It's a much bigger house than I expected," Rob said breaking him out of his reminiscing. He had opened the shutters in here too, and now Danny was making the most of the new territory he got to explore.

"Too big maybe," Julian said thinking of all these darkened rooms sitting empty for years. "There's nothing cozy or welcoming about this place."

"So far Danny hasn't noticed that," Rob pointed out with a wry smile.

Seeing how Danny was happily running back and forth in front of a wall of books, Julian had to agree. "I guess not. I just need to stop moping." But to him it was like they weren't all walking through the same house.

They were on their way to the kitchen when there was a knock on the door. It startled Danny and he ran to Julian.

"I'm expecting someone," Julian told him. Then he spoke to Rob as well. "I wanted a handyman to do a few things in here."

"I'll get the door," Rob volunteered so Julian could stay back with Danny. Julian appreciated that, and he took Danny's hand to lead him to the front hall. They got within sight of the front door but stayed back while Rob opened the door.

Standing in the doorway was a man with an impressive physique, dark hair and blue eyes. "I'm Mitch McEvers," he said and looked at Rob then over at Julian.

"You're here to see Julian. I'm Julian's assistant, Rob." They shook hands and Julian felt a pang of unreasonable jealousy. He and Rob had never shaken hands.

"Julian Brenner," he said to Mitch as he came in. As he shook hands with Mitch as well, Julian noticed that he looked like he had a crushing grip but shook hands like a man who had nothing to prove.

While holding onto Julian's free hand and hiding behind him, Danny looked up at the newcomer curiously.

"This is my little brother, Danny," Julian said and watched Danny duck his head shyly.

"Nice to meet you, and welcome to Peach Tree," Mitch told him.

Danny stayed hidden behind Julian but felt brave enough to wave at Mitch, and got a smile in return.

"I have a daughter who's a little older than you. I'm sure you'll get to meet her one of these days," Mitch said.

Julian tried not to let on that he wasn't eager to set up any play dates for Danny. His experiences with other kids at day care weren't encouraging. The little guy just got scared too easily, and other kids didn't understand so they teased him.

"Let's show Mitch around," Julian said to Danny and they started with the living room. "I'd like to do something about those shutters."

Mitch looked them over. "The wood on some of these is faded and cracked. I can replace it and stain it to match."

"Actually I'd like all the shutters painted white," Julian said and Mitch looked surprised.

"That's really going to change the look of the house," Mitch said.

"I hope it will brighten up this place," Julian said.

"It will," Mitch assured him and made notes on his clipboard.

To free up Julian, Rob offered Danny his hand. "You want to go see if there are any books for kids in the library?"

Julian wasn't sure he would go, but after getting a nod from him, Danny let go of his hand and took Rob's. The two of them went off, and Julian and Mitch discussed what else needed to be done. Mitch seemed very efficient and not very talkative. Just as well since Julian was still preoccupied by doubts about being there.

With the plans for the work finalized, they met up with Rob at the front door. "Danny is reading in the library," he said before Julian could ask.

"Reading?" Julian said, but he was more surprised that Danny didn't mind being left alone.

"Looking at pictures in a book called the *Amphibians of Africa*," Rob said.

"I remember that book," Julian said. It was funny to think of Danny looking at it now. "Mitch and I were just finishing up."

As they stepped out in front of the house, Mitch looked all around and smiled. "The last time I was up here was for the wedding this

summer." He turned to Julian. "I heard you changed the rules so Sam and Wyatt could get married up here like they wanted. That was really nice of you."

"Are they guys?" Rob wondered. He probably wondered if Sam was short for Samantha.

"They are," Mitch said and Rob turned to Julian with an approving smile. Then Mitch waved and went off toward his SUV.

His blond hair shining in the sun, Rob stared after him, and Julian wondered if Mitch might be his type then did his best to dismiss the thought. That kind of thing was none of his business.

As they were going back inside, Rob had a pleased expression on his face. Thinking it was because of Mitch, Julian felt another pang of jealousy.

"It's cool that a small town like this is gay friendly," Rob said.

"Is it?" Julian said vaguely. He was still preoccupied with unseemly worry that Rob might be attracted to Mitch.

"It seems like it is. That handyman wasn't homophobic," Rob noticed.

"I would hope not. He's gay too," Julian informed him.

"Oh, OK," Rob said but he didn't seem especially pleased to hear it.

"He and his fiancé want to get married in the orchard as well." As Julian told him about that, he watched for signs of disappointment from Rob, but he didn't see any.

Instead Rob gave him an inquisitive look. "And you said yes to all these weddings?" Rob asked like that surprised him.

"It's allowed as long as they're residents of the town," Julian explained. He had changed the rule mostly because he knew his grandfather would have hated it, but it was still nice to see that it made some people happy.

"That's great," Rob said with a smile. He seemed to really like the idea. If it put a smile on his face, it was the right decision.

Lying on the library floor, Danny seemed pretty well occupied with his reading, so they left him to it. "We can go look at the offices," Julian said as they went next door.

"Offices?" Rob said.

Julian showed him the office that adjoined the library on one side and on the other side adjoined the bigger office his grandfather had used.

Going in from the library, Rob crossed the small office and stopped in the discreet doorway in the corner. That was the door to his grandfather's office that his assistant used. There was another set of double doors across from his grandfather's desk. Those led out into the hall.

Julian didn't go over to look in. It was one of his least favorite rooms

in this house. The only times he had gone in there was to be lectured or punished.

"That one is my grandfather's old office. But I'll be using this one. My grandfather's assistants used to use it," Julian said as he opened the shutters, and the office brightened around him. It was a nice office, simply decorated and not too big.

"You want to set up your office in here?" Rob said, not understanding his choice to use the smaller office. "But there is that big one."

"You can use it if you like," Julian told him. His grandfather's wood paneled office didn't appeal to him, and he knew the memories would weigh on him in there. He wanted to be able to concentrate.

"That seems the wrong way around," Rob said as he went into the big office with that massive desk and all those built in shelves full of binders that Julian had never cleared out.

"Let's set up a few things in here," Julian decided and they unpacked some of the boxes that had been delivered to the house then Rob got some more from the car.

With his jacket off, lifting boxes, bending and stretching, Rob looked so good. It was a struggle for Julian not to notice and admire him. But it wasn't like Julian didn't have enough to occupy him. There was the office to put in order and Danny to look after.

Since the assistant's office was connected to the library, they could see Danny in there. Lying on the library floor and flipping through the nature book, Danny would look up and crane his neck to catch sight of them through the office door. Once he assured himself that they were still there, he would go back to 'reading'. A few minutes later he would do the same thing again.

Working on setting up the office kept Rob and Julian busy until Danny came to the door and poked his head in.

"You found us," Rob said to him.

"We should take a break and look upstairs. Then we'll have dinner," Julian said.

"We're not done with downstairs," Rob pointed out.

"There's only the kitchen," Julian said.

"We won't need that," Rob joked.

"I won't make much use of it. I can't cook. And you?" Julian asked.

"Not really," Rob said then he turned to Danny. "Can you cook?"

"No. I'm a kid," Danny told him reasonably, and Rob gave him that bright, beautiful smile.

Chapter 6

They had been there a while, and Rob couldn't believe they hadn't even finished touring the whole house. The kitchen was big, full of marble and dark wood, like the rest of the house. Though the appliances in there were in an older style, they were expensive looking.

"What did you want to do for dinner?" Rob asked as they poked around in the kitchen. It wasn't stocked with anything but dishes and years old spices.

"We can order in from the local café," Julian said automatically. "By the time we're done with upstairs, our dinner should be here."

"The fridge is empty. Does the local grocery store deliver?" Rob wondered.

That's when Julian looked over at Danny who was opening and closing drawers. "Maybe Danny shouldn't stay cooped up in here. We can go into town. That way we can eat, do some shopping and you can familiarize yourself with Peach Tree, not that there is much to it."

His decision surprised Rob, but Julian did whatever was best for Danny.

"We're going out to dinner and to see the town," Julian told his little brother, but he wasn't too excited.

"OK," Danny said cautiously. "Are we going in the car again?"

"We are, but it's only a short trip. We'll go now and look at the upstairs later. Danny should see the town while it's still light out," Julian said. He must have been worried that being out after dark in an unfamiliar place would scare him.

Danny already seemed apprehensive as they went to the car and Julian got him into his car seat. "Want to wear your yellow cap?" Rob asked him seeing the cap on the back seat.

"Aha," Danny said. As soon as the yellow cap was on his head, he showed more confidence.

Rob sat in the back with him, and the drive to town was over in no time. Soon they were walking down Main Street with its tourist attractions and quaint stores. Tourists were taking full advantage, and Rob wondered if the three of them seemed like tourists as well.

His ears sticking out from under his precious, yellow baseball cap, Danny looked all around and didn't seem too scared.

"I think he likes this better than a city street," Julian said.

"It's not as loud and the buildings aren't too big, right?" Rob asked Danny.

He nodded but he was preoccupied with looking around. Julian

pointed out their destination up ahead just as a little blond girl came out the doors of the place called Peach Tree Café. She was holding the hand of a good-looking, young guy who was staring at his phone. The little blond girl smiled and waved at Danny. Hesitantly, Danny gave her a little wave in return.

"I guess there might be some kids here for you to play with," Rob said since the girl was only a little older than him.

Inside the café, it was bustling and it smelled really good. "I didn't realize it would be so busy," Julian said seeing that there were no free tables.

Rob was about to ask if they should get takeout, when an older, blond woman approached them.

"Julian Brenner," she said. "I saw your picture online, an article about some investment firm. You look even handsomer in person."

"Mrs. Del Rio," Julian said.

"The one and only," the woman said.

"Since when? Don't you have a daughter-in-law or something? Rico's mother?" a teenaged waitress asked her while holding a tray with only a bill and a credit card on it.

Rob wondered which table was about to become available while Mrs. Del Rio introduced the young waitress. "This is Hannah, and she's not wrong. There is that other Mrs. Del Rio, but I am the original. Hannah, this is the famous Julian Brenner." Mrs. Del Rio then noticed the same thing on Hannah's tray that Rob had noticed. "Looks like we're about to have a table for you."

"Nice to meet you Hannah," Julian said. "This is my assistant Rob Gerric."

"And whose kid is he?" Hannah jumped in to ask before Julian could introduce Danny.

"Danny is my brother," Julian said.

"Such a little brother, my goodness," Mrs. Del Rio said leaning down to smile at Danny. "Do you handsome guys think you might be hungry?"

Danny nodded and Julian agreed. "I guess we are."

"I'll have that table ready for you in just a sec," Hannah said and she went off.

It turned out that Mrs. Del Rio was the owner of the café and also a former Vegas showgirl whose photos decorated the walls of the café. While they waited and chatted with Mrs. Del Rio, Julian kept checking to make sure Danny was doing OK, but as long as he stayed by his big brother's side, it was all good.

Once they were seated, Danny got his own menu to look at. He

disappeared behind it while Rob and Julian smiled at each other.

"Did you find something good?" Rob asked Danny.

"I don't know," Danny said quietly. "Julian is gonna help me."

"Of course I will," Julian said. "I see some chicken I think you'll like." That turned out to be chicken tenders breaded with panco and parmesan. Rob was tempted to have that himself. Plenty of things on the menu tempted him, but he kept it simple and got a bacon burger.

Danny leaned over the table to tell him, "I like burgers too."

"We're burger buddies," Rob told him then they both looked at Julian.

"I like them as well," Julian said after they peer pressured him. But in the end he ordered mushroom ravioli.

Hannah brought their order. Setting Danny's food in front of him, she told him, "Those are real good. Enjoy."

Rob noticed that any time someone spoke to Danny, Julian watched him closely to make sure he wasn't upset. So far, Danny only got shy but he wasn't too scared. Seeing that he was reacting so well put a bright expression on Julian's face that made him look much younger and more gorgeous of course.

"How old are you anyway?" Rob blurted out before he could stop himself. "Sorry. I spoke without thinking."

"I'm twenty-five," Julian told him with a faint smile.

"I'm a year older than you," Rob said. Glancing over at Danny, Rob noticed he was holding up three fingers. "Oh, sorry. Are you three?" Rob asked him.

Danny nodded.

"You're practically a young man," Rob told him but Danny shook his head.

"I'm little," he said.

"Right. A little brother," Rob said and Danny looked both pleased and shy. It must still be new to him and he was proud to be called that.

Rob smiled, but inside he was brooding a little. It made him feel bad that he was temping and Julian had a serious and lucrative career.

"It's nice to be born into money," Julian said. Did he know what Rob was thinking and he wanted to make him feel better? He must have.

"I'm sure you accomplished plenty on your own," Rob said and he meant it.

"I could afford to fast track my way through college with a heavy class load. But without money and connections, I would be working from a cubicle like others my age," Julian said.

Rob doubted it, but obviously Julian didn't feel he deserved his own success. "So no partying at college for you?"

Julian first looked over at Danny, saw that his little brother was busy with his food, but he still lowered his voice. "I had a bad time at

school. I didn't expect college to be any better."

"Too bad. I overdid the partying and never finished," Rob confessed.

"I envy you," Julian said, but Rob didn't see how that was possible.

At the end of their meal, Mrs. Del Rio brought over a peach pie with whipped cream for Danny. It wasn't something they ordered. It was a special treat for Danny.

"Two pies in one day?" Rob said and Julian made a face.

Rob could have guessed he wouldn't approve of too many sweets, but there was no saying no to Mrs. Del Rio, so he just thanked her. Then he told Danny, "That's because today is special. Our first day in Peach Tree."

They watched him eat and get whipped cream on his face. Then it was time for some quick shopping. By the time they headed back to the house, the sun was starting to set behind the hill. It made for an amazing sight as they drove that way.

Rob pointed it out to Danny. "The sun is going to the same place we are. The sun is going home to bed."

As Rob said that, the words came back to him in his mother's voice. It was something she used to tell him and his sister when they were little. Then she would add, "Soon it will be your bedtime too."

Spending time with Julian and Danny made Rob think of her and miss her.

"You OK, Rob?" Julian asked him. He must have noticed his sad expression in the rearview mirror.

"Sure. Maybe I'm just a little sleepy," Rob said for Danny's benefit. The little guy would be going to bed soon, but Rob didn't expect to sleep very well with all these memories of his mom coming back to him.

Chapter 7

Though Julian didn't like being back in Peach Tree, he had to admit that everything today had gone better than he expected. Rob was a great help and Danny didn't have a serious fright. Julian wasn't as hopeful about tonight, but he didn't plan on leaving Danny by himself.

Going inside the house, they could see the sun setting through the living room windows.

"This is why my grandfather always kept the shutters closed, only opened the slats a little," Julian said as the setting sun filled the room with a brilliant, rosy light.

"But this is a great view," Rob said. The light was already deepening and coloring the sky with the coppery shades of fall leaves.

For a while, they stood at the window together and watched the sunset. While holding up Danny so he could see better, Julian pointed out the river shining and meandering through the countryside before losing itself among some evergreen covered hills.

Once the show was over, it was time to check out the bedrooms upstairs.

"Up there?" Danny asked pointing up the staircase.

"I bet your room is somewhere up there," Rob said and turned on the light above the staircase so it wouldn't look so forbidding to Danny.

Julian confirmed it. "That's right. All the bedrooms are up there, so I will never be far away."

Danny climbed up one step at a time and Julian and Rob kept pace with him. At the top of the stairs, Julian turned on the hallway light and Danny went a little ahead. He cautiously went up to the six sets of doors, which all stood open. Each time he peered inside the dark rooms, he looked back as if to make sure Julian and Rob were still there.

"There's nothing scary up here," Julian assured him.

"I'm not scared," Danny claimed and he pouted at Julian before he went on to peer inside the next room.

The first two doors were the guest rooms. Julian pointed them out to Rob. "Either of these rooms should work for you," Julian told him as he opened the doors further and turned on the lights so Rob could have a better look. "Both have their own bathrooms."

"Fancy," Rob said seeing the old fashioned décor. He then made a quick decision. "I'll take the one with the orchard view."

"That's right. The view," Julian said as he went over to the window. "I remember looking out there, watching the workers tend to the trees. Harvest time was my favorite time of year. But when peach trees are in bloom..." Julian trailed off.

Rob would be long gone by then. This job and this living arrangement were temporary after all.

Turning away from the window, Julian found himself face to face with him. He held his breath and noticed Rob's green eyes again. Transfixed for a moment, he stared into them.

"Sorry. I was crowding you," Rob said and he backed away.

"No," Julian said and hoped he hadn't made him uncomfortable. "I was just wondering where Danny was."

The last time they saw him, he was going down the hall. Now he was hovering in the doorway of one room in particular.

"That room must have something good in it," Rob said as they went to join him.

"I doubt that," Julian said and then he found himself in the doorway of his old bedroom. Turning on the light inside with his hand trembling slightly, Julian was greeted with a familiar sight of his bed, his desk, his childhood and his nightmares. The light came on, so that was good, not like those times when he was being punished.

Except for the little boy who was walking in bravely, ready to explore, everything was exactly the same as Julian remembered it. The bedding was striped brown and beige, the rug was patterned in beige and black. The only decorations on the walls were framed, old maps.

Nothing in the room was suited for a little kid, but it looked like Danny was ready to make himself at home in there. He sat on the floor in front of the bookcase and pulled out a book. Opening it in his lap, he started leafing through it.

"What did you find?" Julian asked him and Danny held up a children's book about animals.

"Clockodile," Danny said.

"Crocodile," Julian corrected him. Then he corrected him again. "And that's an alligator."

Rob laughed and got down to check out the bookshelf. "Some interesting books in here," he said to Danny. "You're finding lots of good stuff."

"Is it Danny's room?" Danny asked looking up at Julian.

"It can be your bedroom if you want," Julian told him and Danny looked pleased.

Leaving him in his new room and stepping out into the hallway, Julian shook his head. "Danny seems to like it a lot more than I ever did. But it's not much of a kid's room."

As he looked at the dark furniture, the heavy curtains, Rob didn't disagree. "We can change that, add some color and more toys." He was so ready to look on the bright side of things.

Pointing out a door across the hall, Julian told him. "This sitting room can be for you to use."

"That's great. Thanks," Rob told him as he looked inside, noticed the comfortable seating and the TV. "There is no TV in the guest room. This will come in handy, but I'll keep it down at night."

"That TV is ancient," Julian pointed out.

"It will do. I just like it on if I can't sleep," Rob said and Julian was surprised. He was going to ask him if he had trouble sleeping, but he changed the subject.

"That's going to be your bedroom, right?" Rob said indicating the double doors at the end of the hall.

"I guess so," Julian said though he wasn't looking forward to sleeping in his grandfather's old bedroom. He had considered taking one of the guest rooms, but that would put him right next door to Rob, and that seemed... unwise.

"You can go and settle in, and I'll get Danny ready for bed," Julian said to Rob.

Danny's teeth were brushed and he was in his pajamas. "I'll stay with you tonight," Julian told him. "I just need one thing." With that he left him sitting on his bed and went to the end of the hall.

His grandfather's bedroom wasn't familiar territory. As a kid, Julian never went in there. Now he only took a quick look around. His grandfather's bedroom was large, old fashioned and still closed up. Julian didn't bother opening the shutters in there. He just picked up the armchair from the corner and carried it to Danny's room.

In the hall, Rob spotted him with it. "I could have helped you with that."

"I got it," Julian said. It was heavy, but he could manage. And maybe he wanted to show off a little.

"I guess you'll be keeping Danny company," Rob said when he saw where he was taking it. "I'll stop by to say good night."

Seeing Julian carrying in a chair through his door, Danny looked at it curiously. "Another chair?" He said since there was already a chair by the desk. Danny then figured it out. "One chair for Danny and one other chair for Julian."

"That's right. I'm going to sit in it and make sure you sleep well tonight," Julian told him.

"I can have the light?" Danny asked and looked at the round, brass lamp by his bed.

"You can," Julian said then he pulled back the covers. "Climb in."

Julian didn't think this bed was much bigger than Danny's old one, but it seemed to swallow him up. Maybe because the bedding was

dark and not kidlike.

Tucking him in, Julian told him. "We'll get you a fun comforter soon."

"Not the bee?" Danny asked and pointed at the one that covered him now.

"This is a bee comforter?" Julian said. It was striped in brown and beige. "I guess it is. Which book should I read you?" Julian had the *Super Strong Little Bee* book ready on top of the stack of Danny's books they brought with them, but he wanted something different.

"Read about the alligator crocodile," Danny said.

"OK," Julian said and got the book about animals. After a little bit of flipping past familiar, well worn pages, he found the alligator. It was pictured barely peeking out of the water, so it didn't look too scary. For a while Julian read about the alligator then he noticed that Rob had stopped by.

Leaning on the doorjamb, Rob looked in. "Don't mind me. That was interesting. I just wanted to say good night."

"You're here all night?" Danny asked him.

"Right. My bedroom is just down the hall," Rob reminded him, but Danny wasn't done.

"And in the morning?"

"I'll be here in the morning too," Rob assured him.

Danny must have been unsettled finding himself in a new place. At least he seemed happy to have Rob there.

"Good night. Sleep tight, little guy. I'll see you in the morning," Rob told him.

"Good night," Danny said to him.

It took a while for Danny to fall asleep, but finally his eyes did close. Julian sighed as he slumped into the armchair with the animal book in his lap. As long as he had this book, no one had ever read it to him. Julian didn't have the book while Mrs. Kent, his nanny, was still alive, but she must have read something to him. He wished he could remember. She had a kind, grandmotherly voice.

After he lost her at five, Julian was not allowed to have another nanny. His grandfather had decided that they would baby him and make him soft. He was a small boy with no parents to speak of, only a cold, forbidding figure of his grandfather looming over him disapprovingly. Dogged by a sense of loneliness in every room in this house, Julian never thought of this place as home. It was too big, too quiet, too dark, a place where a young spirit would wither.

Danny didn't seem to feel that way about the house. He had explored and played contentedly with the things Julian hadn't been allowed to touch, and now he was sleeping peacefully.

Since he was likely to stay asleep at least for a while, Julian decided this was a good time to stretch his legs. He went out into the hall just in time to see Rob coming up the stairs with a cup in his hand.

"I was just bringing this to you. You picked this out at the store, so I figured you must like it," Rob said as he handed him the cup of black tea.

"You're off duty now. You didn't need to do this, but thank you. I appreciate it," Julian said as he took the cup from him. He tried not to let their hands touch, but they did briefly. He shivered a little at the quick contact then began speaking again to cover his reaction. "I'll be going back to sit in Danny's room."

"Keeping watch over your little brother," Rob said with a smile.

"So far, he's sleeping peacefully."

"He did well today, wasn't too scared of anything," Rob noted.

"You did well too. I appreciate all your help," Julian told him and looked into his green eyes.

He tried not to stare at Rob, the outline of his body under the jeans and sweater, not to lose himself in the depth of his voice or the lush green of his eyes.

"Can I get you anything else?" Rob asked.

"I just told you that you were off duty," Julian reminded him then he frowned. He did want to get some things from the office, but he didn't want to leave Danny alone that long.

"Anything you need, I'm here," Rob prompted him. He could tell that there was something Julian wanted.

"All right. Could you watch over Danny for a little while? I want to get some work from the office, do some reading," Julian said.

"You should try and sleep as much as you can in that chair," Rob told him.

"There's no chance of that," Julian said.

"OK. I'll stay with Danny until you get back," Rob told him, but he made it clear with a stern look that he wanted him to rest, not work himself to death.

So he was going to be that kind of assistant, Julian thought to himself as he hurried downstairs. Rob wouldn't be the first assistant who tried to boss him around, but he might be the only one who could get away with it.

Back in Danny's room, Julian found Rob sitting in the armchair and leaning forward. Noticing him as he came in, Rob stood up and came over to him. He inclined to whisper to Julian, "He seemed a little restless, but he settled down again soon. He didn't wake up."

Julian nodded and mouthed, "Thank you." It was good to have

someone else there to watch over Danny, but Julian was also aware of how close they stood. He had felt Rob's breath warm against his ear, his body only inches away. The feeling of closeness stayed with him even after Rob was gone.

With a silent sigh, Julian settled into the armchair again, but he couldn't focus on the work he had brought with him. Would he be able to work here at all with reminders of his grandfather around every corner?

But that wasn't the problem at the moment. Being back here was clouding his mind, but memories from his gloomy childhood were interrupted by a breathless awareness that Rob was under the same roof with him. Only a few doors down from Julian, he was a lot more real than any shadows of the past.

Chapter 8

As Rob got up and looked out the window of his bedroom, the morning sky was lit up with streaks of fiery orange and red. Not a bad view to wake up to, and Rob noticed the quiet too. Maybe that's how he had managed to get some sleep, mostly in the last few hours while dawn was breaking.

He was getting ready, and listening to snatches of conversation as Julian helped Danny with his morning routine. But when Rob was done in his own bathroom and stepping out of his room, he didn't hear or see either Julian or Danny.

They weren't upstairs, so Rob went to see if they had gone down to breakfast. They weren't in the kitchen though or anywhere downstairs. Giving up for now, Rob went back into the kitchen to make some coffee. He was just about to pour the water, when he looked out the window over the sink and spotted Julian and Danny outside.

Once he had the coffee going, Rob went out to see what the two of them were up to. The kitchen door led out to the side of the house. That's where the two of them were hanging out. Julian was holding on to Danny while he leaned over a garden wall and looked down the slope toward the road that meandered up the hillside before turning to go to the front of the house.

"Good morning. You guys having fun already?" Rob asked them.

"Rob is here!" Danny said like he thought Rob might have disappeared overnight.

"Yes, and I was looking for you guys. I started coffee. It should be ready soon," Rob told Julian.

"Danny was wondering what was out here, so I decided to show him," Julian said.

Leading out of the kitchen door was a path made of stone steps. It curved slightly at first then turned into a switchback path further down the slope. Stone retaining walls marked off three different levels of the garden. Planted mostly with evergreen bushes, the garden was orderly and well maintained.

"It's nice out here," Rob said while enjoying the view. "It could use a table and some chairs so you can drink your coffee in the fresh, morning air."

"I'll order some," Julian decided.

"Really?" Rob was surprised at how fast Julian wanted to make his words a reality.

"It's a good idea," Julian told him.

Rob pointed down to a spot on the lower level. "What about a bench down there so you and Danny could sit and enjoy the view?" he said

and gave Julian a challenging grin.

Julian asked Danny's opinion on that. "Should we have a bench?"

"OK," Danny agreed.

"I'll order that too," Julian made note of it on his phone.

"I better stop," Rob said and Julian chuckled.

Despite being pretty cheerful this morning, Julian looked like he hadn't slept a wink. During his sleepless night, he had been with Danny the whole time. He was one dedicated big brother.

Figuring that coffee was done, Rob went in and brought out two cups with coffee and a coffee cup with orange juice for Danny.

"It was easier to carry three cups," he explained as he let Julian take a cup with coffee from him. Rob handed Danny the cup with juice. "Did you think I brought you coffee?"

"I didn't know," Danny said and started sipping his juice from the coffee cup.

"What's the plan for today?" Rob asked, though he wasn't sure if any plans would include him. It was Sunday, so he should be on his own today. But really, he didn't know what he would do if left to his own devices.

"I thought we could go out for breakfast. But first, Mitch will be here soon, and we'll get to meet his fiancé. They work together," Julian said. "I got a text from him a little while ago. Danny and I were watching for them to drive up."

Rob was surprised. "They're working on Sunday?"

"Apparently. Mitch will be going to Ashbury today. That's the next town over. It's quite a bit bigger than Peach Tree. That's where he's getting some supplies. I added a few more things to Mitch's list since he was here yesterday. He wanted to do some more measuring."

"He doesn't slack off," Rob said.

"He wants to get started Monday, and I'd like this house in order as soon as possible."

"I guess you're two likeminded guys," Rob said.

A few minutes later they saw Mitch's car make its way up the hill. Going around the house, they went to meet him in front. They got their first look at Mitch's fiancé as he got out of the car. He was tall and very good-looking with dark hair and hazel eyes. Rob realized they had seen him in town yesterday with a little blond girl.

Mitch made introductions. "This is Julian Brenner and his little brother Danny. This is his assistant Rob Gerric. This is my fiancé, Enrico Del Rio."

"He's Mrs. Del Rio's grandson," Julian told Rob as they both shook hands with him.

"Nice to meet you, Enrico," Rob said.

"Rico is fine," he said then he squinted at Julian. "Thanks for letting us get married up here. But I can't believe the guy who owns the orchard looks like you. I was picturing you all wrong. Look at him, Mitch. He's not a silver fox or a pudgy middle-aged beardo. He's a hot, young beardo."

"I've already seen him," Mitch said evenly and gave his fiancé a wry grin.

If Mitch was serious and dedicated like Julian, Rico was like nobody else. He just met them and he was already shooting his mouth off at will.

"This whole time, I figured Dracula lived here, but it's just you guys," he said, pointing at the house.

"Dracula?" Danny said though Rob didn't know if he knew who that was.

Not wanting to scare him, Rico corrected himself. "I meant Count Chocula."

Danny knew who that was and he nodded. "He doesn't live here, just me, Julian and Rob," Danny whispered to set Rico straight, and he laughed.

Julian looked surprised that Danny was so talkative. Maybe he was responding to Rico's maturity level.

"Speaking of, we're going out for breakfast," Rob said. He took the coffee cup from Julian and then he addressed Danny. "Let's go put away these cups and get your yellow hat and my jacket while these guys discuss business. Is that OK?" He looked at both Danny and Julian for their OK. Julian left it up to his little brother, who looked up at Rob and gave him his free hand.

By the time, the two of them were ready to go, Julian had come in to get his own jacket. Together, the three of them headed out to his car while Mitch and Rico got to work inside.

"I gave Mitch a key to the house so he can do his work even when we're out," Julian said.

"Mitch seems like a serious guy, but what about his fiancé. Talk about opposites," Rob said while Julian buckled up Danny.

"After meeting his grandmother, you expected Rico to be the shy, retiring type?" Julian asked.

"Good point," Rob said.

Once again he was sitting in the back with Danny, but the little guy wasn't too nervous. Still Danny was relieved when the car ride was over and they got out on Main Street, a block from the cafe. As they walked up the street, they spotted a group of three kids and two good-looking guys. One guy was blond and more muscular. The other had

sandy hair and a trim physique. The kids were all a little older than Danny and kind of noisy. The noisy group was clustered on the sidewalk ahead of them. As Julian, Rob and Danny approached, one of the kids pointed their way.

"Him!" a little blond girl exclaimed. "It's the boy with the yellow hat, the one I saw." She was the same kid who had been with Rico and waved at Danny the day before.

"I saw his hat too when he got out of that car," the little blond boy said.

"I saw him before before," the little girl told him.

"Don't fight. You'll scare him," a sandy haired boy told the two younger kids, but Danny didn't seem scared of the loud bunch.

Looking up at the two guys, the blond boy demanded, "Uncle Wyatt, we have to talk to that kid over there."

The blond guy, whose name must have been Wyatt, eyed the kids. "You have important kid business with him?" The kids all chorused a yes. "OK. Let's go."

The other guy with him balked, but the kids were already running over.

"See, it's him. The boy with the yellow hat," the little girl said, proud of her discovery as the kids clustered in front of Danny.

Danny looked up at Julian but didn't seem to be scared. It was more like he was looking for permission to talk to these kids.

"Do you live here?" the older boy asked Danny, who didn't answer.

Julian answered for him. "Yes, he does. We live up on the hill."

"Then he can be my friend," the younger boy decided.

"I saw him first," the girl told him again.

"Don't fight. We don't even know his name," the older boy told the other two.

"I'm Danny," he told them. Surprisingly, he didn't seem too intimidated by them or their noisy arguing.

In the meantime, the guy named Wyatt introduced himself and his husband, Sam, and Rob realized they were the guys who got married on the hill. They confirmed it when they thanked Julian for letting them get married up there after he introduced himself and Rob.

Then Wyatt gave the names of the kids from youngest to oldest. Sammy McEvers was the little blond girl. Riley Hayes was the blond boy with brown eyes and his older brother was DJ Hayes.

"He's Sam. I'm Sammy," the little girl told them and pointed at Sam and herself to make sure there was no confusion.

"And your name is McEvers. Like Mitch McEvers?" Rob said.

"That's my dad. Do you know my dad?" Sammy wanted to know.

"We do. We just saw him this morning," Julian told her.

"We're waiting for him and Rico for a group excursion to Ashbury,"

Wyatt told them.

"They should be here soon," Julian said.

In the meantime, the kids were getting acquainted. "That's a good hat," Riley told Danny and all the other kids agreed.

That made Danny smile shyly. "Julian got it for me."

"Who's he?" the kids wanted to know, though he had just been introduced.

Danny pointed him out. "Him. He's my big brother."

"That's just like you," Riley said to his own big brother, DJ, then he looked from him to Julian like he was comparing them. Finally Riley came out with his verdict. "He's bigger."

"That's because he's a grown-up big brother," DJ huffed.

Riley got thoughtful like he was trying to decide if that was a good enough excuse. Then he turned to Julian again. "But you don't have the good ears like him," Riley said to Julian while pointing at Danny.

Danny touched his ears and looked from side to side like he was trying to catch sight of them.

"Those are good ears," Sammy agreed. "Like a teddy bear."

All the kids were now looking at his ears appreciatively. It seemed like Danny, his hat and his ears were a big hit. When Mitch and his fiancé came to join them, Rico noticed the same thing.

"Look how many friends you made, little dude. Good job," Rico told him a little too loudly and tried to give him a hi-five, but Danny was too shy and ducked his head.

"Rico! Did you scare him?" Sammy asked kind of sternly, and now all the kids looked up at Rico with accusing faces.

"What? I did not," Rico said defensively and looked all around for support but got none.

Only Danny came to his defense. "He didn't scare me. I'm OK," he assured Sammy.

"OK," Sammy said and she looked up at Rico like she was willing to let him off the hook just this once.

"Thanks, man," Rico said to Danny. "I owe you one."

"We better get going," Sam said. "Thank you again for letting us get married in the orchard."

"We'll see you around. We can set up a play date with the kids," Wyatt said.

"Maybe we can do that," Julian said, but that wasn't good enough for Riley.

He came up to Julian, stood straight and turned his face up to him. "You gonna let Danny be friends with us, Mister?" Riley asked while giving Julian a challenging, little kid stare.

"I might," Julian said.

"That means yes," Riley reported to the other kids confidently.

"That's a kid who knows how to turn a maybe into a yes," Wyatt said with approval.

They all went off and the kids waved to Danny, who waved back and smiled.

"Well that was..." Julian trailed off like mere words couldn't do justice to that encounter.

Rob laughed, but looking down at Danny he saw how bright-eyed he was. It did him good to be around other kids.

And Julian had a nice look in his dark eyes too. Rob tried not to think of the look as pretty or to try and imagine what his eyes might look like when he was happy or ecstatic.

"Let's go have breakfast," Julian said and led the way inside the Peach Tree Café.

Like before, the café was crowded and this time they ate at the counter. Danny seemed to like sitting on the barstool between them. Once they were done eating, Rob and Julian helped him hop down, each holding one of his hands.

They were still holding hands like that as they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Should we have an outing of our own," Rob asked then he realized that Julian might not want him along.

"There aren't too many places to go here," Julian said.

Rob didn't know what he meant. "There is a ton of countryside to explore."

Julian looked over to Danny. Maybe he didn't want to take him on another car ride. "You can go hiking. Maybe take a walk by the river," Rob said. He excluded himself so Julian wouldn't feel obligated to have him join them.

Julian noticed and gave him a questioning glance. "What about you? If you'd like to drive anywhere, you can take my car," he offered.

Rob wasn't really interested in a solo drive. "No. I'm good." Maybe he would go back to the house and see what there was to do online.

"You're welcome to join us on our walk," Julian said tentatively.

Rob couldn't tell if he was only making the offer because he felt he had to.

Noticing his confusion, Julian tried to clear things up. "You never have to spend time with us unless you want to."

Rob sighed as he realized that both of them were trying to let each other off the hook. "But you wanted my help with Danny, right," he reminded Julian and looked down at the little boy who didn't seem to be following their conversation. "Who knows what he might get up to."

"I'll definitely need help with Danny," Julian said while Danny waited quietly for their negotiation to be over.

They both smiled down at his patient expression under the yellow hat.

"The three of us are going to go for a walk together," Julian told him, and now Danny smiled too.

They walked over dry fields and then down to the riverbank. There was a gravelly path and some wood planks over the muddy areas. Holding both Rob and Julian's hands, Danny walked between them and squinted at everything in the bright, autumn sunshine.

"This is the same river we saw from the window at the house," Julian told him.

"Same one?" Danny said like he couldn't quite believe it.

As they walked along the river, they reached an area next to a shallow stretch of water where Julian let Danny go and play. Throwing pebbles into the river, Danny was saying "splash" after each one.

With him a little ways off, Julian said to Rob, "This is probably boring for you."

"No, it's nice. We're all getting some fresh air. On a midmorning on a Sunday, what am I going to be doing? Playing video games?" Rob said. He didn't want to say that he just liked being out with Julian and Danny, but that was the truth.

"But if you didn't move here, I bet you would have plenty to do," Julian said.

"Actually, I'm glad I got to get away. Things were not going great for me in the job department or personally." Rob didn't expect to tell Julian about it, but he confessed to him anyway. "I made the mistake of getting involved with my roommate. He wanted to keep pretending he was a hundred percent straight, so he freaked out on me, wanted me out of there."

"Sorry to hear that," Julian said, but Rob couldn't read his expression.

He decided to shift the focus off himself. "You must have some friends around here you'll want to look up and introduce to Danny." Rob pointed to the little guy who was throwing pebbles in a clumsy, overhand way that didn't send them flying very far.

Julian shook his head. "No. I don't have any friends here."

"No friends from school?" Rob said, surprised.

"I never went to school here. I was sent to an all boys boarding school," Julian said.

"That sounds interesting. You didn't like it?" Rob said as he remembered that Julian mentioned having a bad time at school.

"No. It was miserable. I was too quiet. I didn't fit in so I was bullied

relentlessly. When my grandfather found out – not from me, from the school – he told me it was my own fault, that I brought it on myself, and to toughen up. Of course he was a bully himself. It was because of his influence I learned how not to cry in front of the bullies at school, how to put up a wall to keep the pain in and everyone else out."

That sounded so terrible. It made Rob want to revert to his younger self again and just punch the hell out of some bullies. "Wasn't there anyone who could protect you? What about your parents?"

Julian looked at Danny playing just out of earshot and looked so sad. "My mother abandoned me after I was born, and my father did almost the same thing. Though he did visit occasionally to bring me gifts, take me places, then he disappeared. Between his visits, he sometimes seemed as real to me as Santa Claus. My father left me to be raised by my grandfather. That way everyone got what they wanted. My father had his freedom and my grandfather got to mold me in his own image."

"Obviously he failed," Rob said offhandedly. To him, it was clear as day, but Julian looked doubtful. "Ask Danny if you don't believe me. Hey Danny, is Julian a nice guy?"

"Yes," Danny said immediately.

Moving on together, they watched leaves float in the water then Rob spotted a half submerged log. "Do you think that might be an alligator?" he asked Danny.

"Crocodile," Danny said.

"So it's a crocodile. OK," Rob said. "Should we wave to him?"

Danny waved and so did Rob. But they had to stare at Julian for a little bit before be joined in. "Doing silly things is good for you," Rob told him.

Julian looked skeptical about that, and they kept going along the riverbank. Up ahead an old man with a fishing pole was sitting in a folding chair. Seeing the old fisherman, Danny pointed excitedly. "I know what he's doing. He's trying to catch the fishes."

"I think that's Mr. Jasper," Julian said, recognizing the old man. "We can go say hi to him."

Danny took his hand, and they all went over to the fisherman. As they approached and the old guy noticed them, he quickly covered up the bucket next to him before Danny could see anything. Rob had caught a glimpse of some fish wriggling. Nice of the old guy to make sure Danny didn't see them. Julian noticed and gave him a grateful smile. "Hello, Mr. Jasper."

"Huh, so you know me," Mr. Jasper said as he returned Julian's smile.

"I'm Julian Brenner."

Mr. Jasper nodded like he recognized him now. "Of course you are. Look at you all grown up and with a son," he said seeing that Danny

was holding his hand.

Danny shook his head and Julian corrected Mr. Jasper. "This is Danny, my little brother."

"Nice to meet you, young man," Mr. Jasper said to him. He then blinked at Rob. "And this handsome fellow must be your boyfriend," he said to Julian, who got a little flustered. "Or is it husband?"

"I'm just Julian's assistant. My name is Rob," he told Mr. Jasper and shook his hand.

"Oh no. I got it wrong again," Mr. Jasper said and he looked down at Danny who smiled up at him.

Mr. Jasper and Julian chatted for a little bit and then the three of them continued along the river.

"See? I was right. This place is gay friendly," Rob said.

"You've only met a handful of people," Julian pointed out.

"That old guy had us practically married," Rob blurted out then coughed. What was he thinking saying that?

Julian raised an eyebrow at him then saw that Danny had raised his hand and was patting the air.

"Rob is coughing," Danny explained and he did the patting motion again.

"Oh. I'm OK," Rob told him.

"Don't worry. I'll slap him on the back," Julian assured Danny, but he only patted Rob a few times for his little brother's sake.

Still, it was enough to make Rob stop breathing. He wanted Julian to just leave his hand there, maybe move it around in gentle circles, without any thought or intention, just as a way of showing him some affection. Of course Rob was crazy to think like that, and it wasn't like him to pass up an X-rated fantasy for something so small. Julian had the weirdest effect on him.

Chapter 9

After his reaction to Julian's touch caught him off guard, Rob took a moment to recover. He was a few steps behind as they kept going, so he jogged to catch up. Further on, he could see some picnic tables, and Julian pointed up the slope where there were some long tables with bench seats and a fairly small building. "That's L & L Barbeque. We can have lunch there."

As the place came fully into view, Rob saw smoke and smelled it as well as the mouthwatering aroma of meat being cooked over a fire. L & L Barbeque had a tall chimney and plenty of outdoor seating. Still it was packed, with a line of people waiting to order at a window.

As they stood in the back of the line, Rob got out his phone. "I have to text my dad about this place." After he got the reply, Rob had to laugh. "He wants samples, but he'll settle for pictures."

They had to wait for their order, and Rob filled the time by taking pictures for his dad. He showed them to Danny before sending them.

Once they were seated with plenty of messy food in front of them, Rob took more pictures. "Can I send my dad a picture of Danny nibbling on that roasted corn on the cob?" he asked Julian.

"Sure. If it's OK with him," Julian said and they both looked at Danny, who didn't know what he was supposed to do.

Rob now leaned toward Danny. "Is it OK to send my dad this picture of you eating corn?"

"Your dad? OK," Danny said.

Rob sent it and his dad texted back. "He says, 'That takes me back.'"

"I could say the same thing," Julian said. When Rob looked at him questioningly, he continued. "My father used to bring me here when he visited, but my grandfather looked down on this place. I think he lived to find reasons to look down on everything and everyone."

"He probably didn't know how to look good while eating with his hands," Rob said as he took a bite of his pulled pork sandwich.

"What?" Julian said and gave him a confused smile.

Now Rob had to pretend he wasn't talking about him, or checking him out. "It's a talent. Some people have it. Some people make a mess of themselves," Rob said like he wasn't admiring anyone in particular and how sexy he looked eating with his hands.

The look on Julian's face told Rob that he had no clue he was a sexy bastard who banished all decent thoughts from his head. In fact, Rob had never noticed any awareness that Julian knew how hot he was.

Rob thought they might head back to the house after they were done with lunch, but Julian looked at Danny and decided they should let

him enjoy his day out.

"I never had the chance to take him anywhere like this until now. He seems to like it," Julian said. "When I lived here, I never got to just wander around and explore."

They were watching as Danny circled a hollowed out log, peering inside. "You missed out, but that means you get to discover all this with Danny," Rob said to Julian. He didn't mind a day outdoors at all, plus he got to see Julian's more laid back side though he still checked his phone all the time.

Back in town in the late afternoon, they were on their way to Julian's car when a beige SUV parked right next to them. Inside it were all the Hayes guys, and the boys looked excited to see Danny.

"I guess they're back," Rob said as the car door opened and he saw Wyatt stepping out.

"Hi, guys. We're here to pick up some fresh cider from the store, hard and regular," Wyatt said as he opened the back door just as two other cars pulled up. A bunch of kids spilled out of the backs of all three cars. Mitch and Rico were there, and a redheaded woman got out of the third car with a little, redheaded girl who might have been six or so.

Mitch and Sam went into the store, and the kids all gathered into a group to greet Danny and show him off to the little redhead.

"He is a new! And he does have ears like a teddy bear," the redheaded girl exclaimed. "I'm gonna hug him."

"Hold up. Ask permission," the redheaded woman told her as she came over. She offered her hand to Rob. "Hi, I'm Lara Salinger. I already know Julian though I don't know if he knows me," she said and raised an eyebrow at him.

"It's nice to see you again," Julian said, but Rob couldn't tell if he actually recognized her. "This is my assistant Rob Gerric, and this is my little brother, Danny."

"Nice to meet you, Danny and Rob. This one is my daughter Gloria. Say, 'Nice to meet you', honey," she instructed her kid.

"Nice to meet you. Now do I get to hug him, Momma?" Gloria asked impatiently.

Danny looked up at Julian, but he just smiled uneasily and told him, "It's up to you, Danny."

Danny turned to the little girl and put his arms out. The two of them hugged, and they both looked happy. Julian gave Rob a funny look. He didn't know what to expect from his little brother these days.

Gloria showed Danny a bag. "We got candy."

"It's grown-up candy for the scary teacher," Sammy reported.

"Chocolate covered espresso beans. It's the only sweet Noreen likes,"

Lara said.

"You love her," Rico said while Rob wondered if Julian knew who they were talking about. Off his confused look, Rico told him, "Don't believe me? Ask little red. She knows all and tells all."

Lara wasn't allowing that. "Nope," she said and covered Gloria's mouth so she couldn't say anything incriminating.

With all this back and forth, Julian was at a loss, and Rob kind of enjoyed that look on him. Cool and in charge looked good on him too. Everything did.

"Candy is not all we got," Rico said. "We came across this new Italian deli and Wyatt went nuts. Bought everything in sight."

"We discovered it after we already had lunch. I might have overdone it a little so we're having a sandwich party. You guys want to join us, help us eat some stuff and meet the dogs?" Wyatt asked.

"Dogs?" Julian said and looked down at Danny like he wasn't sure how he would feel about that.

At the mention of dogs, Danny looked at him as well. "Doggies. Can we, Julian?" the little guy asked.

"You scared of dogs?" Rico taunted Julian.

"No. I was worried about Danny," Julian told him. He then turned to Rob. "What did you want to do?"

"I'm up for it," Rob said. He had decided to stop wondering if and when Julian wanted him to join in. It was better to take every opportunity to encourage Julian to socialize. That way once Rob was gone, Julian would have people to hang out with. The thought made him kind of sad, but he would just focus on helping out Danny and Julian and not feeling sorry for himself.

"It's officially a sandwich party. Just follow us to our place," Wyatt said as Sam came out of the store with Mitch carrying a crate with cider.

"We have some stuff to drop off so we'll be stopping at home then we'll meet you," Rico said and he waved to them as he left with Mitch and Sammy.

Everyone was climbing back into their cars, but Julian still looked unsure. "Are we really going?"

"They have doggies," Danny said as Julian buckled him into his car seat.

"Doggies and sandwiches. It's going to be some party," Rob said as he got in the back seat with Danny.

"We're going to a party," Danny said, looking excited.

"It seems like we are," Julian told him. He didn't seem as excited, but that only confirmed to Rob that he needed to do this.

Following the two cars that were going straight to the Hayes's, they drove a little ways out of town then stopped at the end of a curving driveway. They had arrived in front of a good size, single story house behind a green fence. There was a garden to one side that was mostly turning yellow, but someone was obviously taking good care of it.

Everyone else went in ahead of them while Julian was still unbuckling Danny. When the three of them reached the front door, it was already open and two dogs were greeting the other kids. Noticing the newcomers, the dogs came over to greet them too. Worried about Danny's reaction to the dogs, Julian stepped forward protectively.

"They're nice dogs," Sam assured him but he still reached down to hold on to a little, fuzzy, white dog.

Danny didn't show any fear though. If anything he looked eager to be released so he could meet them.

While Sam held on and petted the white dog, DJ held on to the little brown dog so Julian and Danny could get close and get acquainted.

Riley was standing by to do the introductions. "That's Barney and that's Brownie," he said, and of course, Brownie was the brown dog.

Then Gloria threw her own two cents in. "They are nice to hug," she said and then she demonstrated.

"You want to hug them?" Riley asked Danny.

While Julian looked apprehensive, Danny nodded.

"Maybe start with petting them," Rob suggested more to put Julian's mind at ease than for Danny's sake.

Rob showed him and saw for himself that these were sweet dogs. With Julian still holding his hand, Danny came over and stroked Barney's back then Brownie's. As he did it, he laughed.

"Now can I hug them, Rob?" Danny asked Rob, who looked at Julian.

Reluctantly he agreed then watched the whole operation like a hawk. It went fine though, and Danny was a happy little guy as he hugged the doggies and they sniffed at him.

"He's good at hugging," Gloria declared.

"She is the hugging expert," Wyatt said as he and Lara came out of a door that led to the kitchen.

"And there's Noreen now," Lara said waving to someone behind them.

Through the open door they could see a petite brunette coming up the drive. There was a big contrast between the two women with Noreen being skinny and small and Lara being tall and very curvy.

"This is Noreen Kurtz," Lara said as Rob and Julian shook hands with her.

"That's the scary teacher," DJ whispered to Danny as he, Julian and Rob were introduced to her.

Despite her reputation, Danny shook hands with her just fine. DJ was

impressed.

"You're not scared of the scary teacher?" DJ asked him.

"No," Danny said.

"He's a brave one," Wyatt said and he winked at Noreen. She seemed used to all this scary teacher stuff.

"Now you met everyone," Wyatt told Julian and Rob. "Let's go build some sandwiches."

"You do the building. I'll do the drinking," Noreen told him.

"We have hard apple cider," Lara told her.

"You know how I feel about sweet booze," Noreen said.

"We have beer," Sam said.

Lara and Noreen stayed in the dining and living room area with the kids and the dogs. All the guys ended up in the kitchen. Rob and Julian were shoulder to shoulder as they tried to stay out of the way. When Rico and Mitch arrived, they joined them in there and Rob and Julian ended up jammed even closer together. Rob had absolutely no problem with that.

But seeing that the kitchen was packed, Julian tried to escape. Rob was going to follow his lead. He was thinking they might find a quiet spot to sit together, but Rico cut them off.

"Not so fast, you two, or do you want a sandwiches with everything on them?" he told them.

"That's no joke," Mitch said seeing the mountain of food Sam and Wyatt were still unpacking.

"This is Wyatt's doing," Sam claimed while Rob and Julian gave up and just hung out with beers in their hands.

"You are not innocent in all this," Wyatt threw in. "You got every kind of olive and pickled pepper. And caponata."

"We need something to put on the sandwiches other than meat," Sam said.

"Look at them arguing like an old married couple." Rico gave them an indulgent smile. Then he snapped at them. "We know you're married. Stop flaunting it."

"You have some reason to be jealous?" Mitch challenged him in a growly voice.

Rick jumped. "No," he said hurriedly. He then gave his fiancé a grin and swooped in for a kiss.

During all that, Julian and Rob stuck close together like they had a mutual defense pact.

"Take your pick over here," Wyatt said to the two of them and gestured at the food.

Julian only glanced at the choices. "Anything is fine," he said recklessly. Rico was already rubbing his hands together and wearing an evil grin.

Rob stepped up ready to save Julian from himself and from Rico. "If there's anything you hate, now is the time to speak up," Rob told him as Wyatt listed too many different combinations for them to choose from.

"You see why we needed help eating this stuff," Sam said to Julian. "I'll make your sandwiches."

When Rico and Wyatt got to work, Rob could see that Sam was really doing them a major favor. The other two were both making super tall sandwiches, trying to outdo each other.

"That's what Sam saved us from," Rob said to Julian.

"Are you guys competing?" Sam asked when he saw what his husband and Rico were doing. "You're done. I'm confiscating your supplies."

Since Sam took away the sandwich fixings, Rico and Wyatt started sneaking slices from each other's sandwiches. They were jostling each other until Sam stepped in.

"You are this close to starting a food fight," Sam said as he got between them. "It might not look like it, but this is supposed to be a dinner party. What are Rob and Julian going to think?"

"Jules does look like he's judging us," Rico said as he squinted at Julian.

"Jules? God. That better not catch on," Julian muttered to Rob.

Rico had heard him though. "Aha! You hate it. Jules it is."

"Never show him your weaknesses," Mitch advised.

"Is that the mistake you made?" Rob asked and Mitch laughed.

"I did. My weakness was him," Mitch said as he smiled at Rico. Touched and a little embarrassed by his words, Rico tried to act cool and Mitch laughed at him. It seemed like Mitch was his weakness too.

Mitch was ready to make sandwiches for the kids when they all crowded into the kitchen. "What kind of sandwich for Danny?" he asked.

"Is it a grown-up sammich or a kid sammich?" Danny asked.

"You want a kid sandwich?" Wyatt said then he looked at his boys. "You heard him."

Riley got his meaning right away. "We get to make sandwiches," he said excitedly.

"Make a mess, you mean," Sam said while Riley was jumping in place.

DJ was quieter but his eyes lit up as Sam and Wyatt set up what they needed on the small kitchen table. It wasn't just the Hayes boys. All the kids clustered around the table and got in on the fun, even Danny.

"They are going to need close supervision," Sam said and glared at Wyatt a little.

"The dogs will lick up the mess," Wyatt said with a shrug. For now

the dogs were being kept out of the way in the living room with Lara and Noreen.

Next to Rob, Julian was holding himself back from helping Danny's clumsy effort at sandwich making. Sam was already there making sure the sandwiches came out edible. In the chaos of the kids making sandwiches, DJ was being careful to do everything right while Riley loaded on the mayo.

"Easy, Ry, it's not frosting," Wyatt told him.

Gloria showed Sammy and Danny how to make a secret smiley face inside the sandwich with ketchup, and they were amazed.

Rico just wanted to make trouble. "You going to make a sandwich for your big brother?" he asked Danny.

"I already made him one," Sam reminded him.

"Did you put mustard?" Danny asked Sam. "Julian likes mustard. What do you like, Rob?"

"Pickles," Rob told him.

"Pickles?" Danny said while looking up at Sam.

"We'll have some pickles on the side," Sam told him.

Rob caught Julian smiling at that and he smiled too. "Danny is making sure we're taken care of," Rob told him. He could tell that Julian was amazed at how well Danny was doing.

Assorted sandwiches and sandwich triangles went to the dining table along with various other things on the side. The kids' food got set up separately on the coffee table. Rob and Julian watched as Danny got taken over there by the other kids.

"That's our kids' table," DJ said to Danny.

"You come and sit with us," Sammy told him.

"Don't let the dogs eat your sandwiches," Sam warned the kids.

"I'm gonna sit with the kids at the kids' table," Danny reported to Rob and Julian.

"That's good. Can we visit you there and say hi?" Rob asked.

"I don't know. Maybe," Danny said uncertainly like he thought the rules about grown-ups going to the kids' table might be strict.

"OK. Be good," Julian told him.

Rob nudged him a little as they went to take their seats at the dining table. "He's going with the flow."

"I'm just not used to seeing him around so many people," Julian said.

"Things are pretty relaxed here. I think he's responding to that," Rob told him, leaning in so he could keep his voice low.

"Very relaxed," Julian murmured like the word was alien to him.

"Your little guy has abandoned you," Lara said as Julian kept glancing over to check on Danny at the coffee table, or the kids' table as everyone called it.

"You lost him for good," Wyatt told him. "The children of the corn have him now."

"Don't make the kids sound creepy," Sam told him, keeping his voice down so the kids couldn't hear.

Through all that, Rob and Julian both kept an eye on Danny to make sure he was doing OK. He was the quietest of the kids, but he piped up to join in their chatter now and then. The other kids treated him like he was everybody's little brother.

But Rob also noticed how taken Danny was with those dogs. He kept looking at them and smiling at them. Whenever they came close, he petted them and hugged them.

Rob caught Julian's eye and told him, "So far, so good." He meant Julian as well as Danny. He wasn't really sure how Julian would take to such a disorganized, freewheeling bunch, but he held his own.

Over dinner of sandwiches with beer and cider flowing, conversations were overlapping and merging. Julian and Mitch managed to talk about the renovations at the house. Julian also spoke to Noreen about the local elementary school. Hearing him talk business with everyone, Rob wondered if he knew how to have a lighthearted conversation. He still found that he focused on Julian's voice more than anyone's, like he wanted to hear every word he said, no matter what the subject was.

Rico more than made up for any serious conversations, as did Wyatt and Lara. The talk turned to weddings, and Rob and Julian got to hear about Sam and Wyatt's wedding with everyone adding their own version of how it went down.

"You did a really good thing letting them get married in the orchard," Rob whispered to Julian.

Briefly, Julian's dark eyes flashed to him warmly and he nodded and smiled. He could see it too. Sam and Wyatt were so happy together. Sam was shy while Wyatt regarded him with an openly adoring look.

At the end of the night, they all exchanged phone numbers, and the kids sent Danny off with some of the candy they bought.

"Thank you for inviting us," Julian told Wyatt as he walked them to their car.

"You were doing us a favor helping to dig us out from under all that food," Wyatt said.

"You guys make some mean sandwiches," Rob told him. "Thank Sam for us too."

"We'll hang out again soon," Wyatt promised, or threatened maybe.

As soon as they got to the house, Danny needed to go straight to bed. When Julian took him to get ready, he asked his little brother, "How

did you like the sandwich party?"

"You and me and Rob made lots of friends. And I got to play with the doggies." Danny kept chattering but that was all Rob caught.

Once Julian had Danny tucked in and asleep, he stepped out of his room for a break. Rob had been texting updates about his day to Christie and his friends when he met up with Julian. It was no accident. He had been hoping to get at least a few minutes alone with Julian.

Rob set aside his phone, and they both leaned on the upstairs railing that overlooked the foyer. "That sandwich party wasn't so bad," Rob said.

"Not at all. Danny had a lot of fun," Julian said.

"And you?" Rob prompted him.

Julian chuckled. "It was a nice change of pace. I don't go to many casual gatherings."

"Casual is kind of an understatement," Rob said. In his college days, his own friends would have outdone this bunch, throwing potluck dinners where almost everyone just brought chips. But these guys were supposed to be responsible adults with kids. Of course Rico and Sam were college age guys, but only Rico acted like it.

"Rico picking on you didn't bother you, did it?" Rob asked. He was worried that Julian might have been putting up with him for Danny's sake.

"He wasn't that bad," Julian said with a smile. Did Rico somehow manage to win him over?

"He did call you Jules," Rob reminded him, but not because he was jealous or anything. After all Rico was happily engaged.

"As long as everyone else doesn't start," Julian said and gave Rob a warning look.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Rob told him then he thought of something and frowned. "The kids who bullied you at school didn't call you Jules, did they?"

"Why would they when they could call me Julie, Julia, or Juliet?" Julian said but he didn't show any signs that it had bothered him much. Maybe that was nothing to what else he had to endure. In a boarding school, bullies would have more time to torment him. There would be no going to the safety of home at the end of a school day.

"I was just worried that Rico might have brought back bad memories," Rob said.

"Hardly. Nothing that happened tonight reminded me of anything I ever experienced," Julian said. With that smile playing on his lips, Rob couldn't imagine that any heavy thoughts were weighing on him.

"Made me think of every drunk gathering of my friends, and this bunch didn't even have the excuse of being properly boozed up," Rob

said.

"But you enjoyed yourself," Julian said.

"How do you know?" Rob asked him since it wasn't a question.

"The look in your eyes. You were in your element," Julian said.

Catching himself staring into Julian's eyes, searching for clues about him, Rob decided to change the subject. "The main thing is that Danny was having fun."

"I didn't expect him to respond so positively to a group of kids after the trouble he had at daycare," Julian said.

"Maybe that was just a few bad apples," Rob said.

"True. It takes just a one or two mean kids. These kids are pretty good with him. I was surprised," Julian said.

"But I bet that doesn't mean you'll stop being protective any time soon," Rob predicted.

"You mean overprotective," Julian said.

Rob denied it. "You're exactly as protective as you need to be. Danny is a vulnerable kid. I saw how he looked for you when he was away from us by the river and even when he was with the other kids. He likes to see you're close."

"When we were by the river, I wanted to see how long he would play by himself. I thought he might get uneasy, but he did well."

"He knows you're watching over him, so he feels safe," Rob told him. Today Rob had tried to watch over both of them, but he wouldn't be able to do that for long. He had fun too, but that wouldn't last either.

Don't you get used to this, Rob said to himself.

To snap himself out of it, he asked Julian. "Are you staying with Danny again all night, or sleeping in that big bedroom?"

"I wasn't planning to sleep in the master bedroom until my new furniture is in there," Julian said. "It will be here tomorrow morning. Tonight I'll stay with Danny to make sure he isn't alone if he wakes up."

"Let me know if you need anything," Rob told him.

"Thank you," Julian said as he went to watch over his little brother.

Rob was hoping Julian would give him something to do that would keep him close. When he didn't, Rob was left to pass the time on his own.

As he hung out in his room, sitting up in bed, streaming some shows, scenes on the screen played out but couldn't catch his attention. That's because Rob kept listening for Julian's voice or his footsteps. When he finally heard him moving around in the hall, Rob was out of bed in a flash.

He didn't rush out of the room though. Stopping, he grabbed a glass and took it with him so it would look like he was just going to the kitchen for a refill or something.

Rob opened his door just in time to see Julian out in the hall with his iPad in front of him.

"Working?" Rob said.

"This isn't work," Julian told him and came over to show him what he was looking at. "I wanted to stock the library with children's books."

Julian had come to stand right next to Rob as he scrolled through some of what he has picked out. With him so close, Rob was distracted but he still noticed how many books he ordered.

"You'll need another library for all this," Rob told him.

"I'll make room," Julian said then he eyed Rob. "Actually, I'll have you do it. You can clear the shelves of anything that doesn't look interesting." He gave Rob a smile then looked back at the iPad. Watching him closely, Rob had a feeling he wasn't really seeing the screen, just staring at it. Maybe he was uncomfortable. It was true that they were only inches apart, but Julian wasn't moving away.

To fill the tense silence Rob grasped for the last threads of their conversation. "No problem. I'll do whatever you want," Rob told him and Julian jumped.

Turning to look at him, he seemed startled as he said, "What?"

"The shelves. In the library," Rob said while noticing how beautiful Julian was, as well as slightly embarrassed and breathing a little faster. Was he flushed too or was it just a trick of the light?

"Right. Thank you. And thank you for today," Julian told him, casting his eyes down.

"Me?" Rob said.

"Today wouldn't have turned out like it did without you. Since we set off for this place, I think everything has gone so well because you're here," Julian told him while still not meeting his gaze. Rob saw his mouth curve into a shy smile though. "I wondered at myself when I hired you so impulsively. That wasn't like me at all, but I can see it was the right decision. Good night."

With that he went off abruptly and Rob sighed. Honestly, he had been holding his breath afraid that Julian might say he didn't need him, and hoping that he would say he wanted him desperately.

Rob couldn't ever remember feeling such a keen sense of anticipation when just exchanging a few simple words with someone. Most of the time, the two of them were with Danny, but Rob still noticed what a sharp effect Julian had on him.

Julian was such a serious, earnest guy and so unbelievably hot. If only the circumstances were different, Rob would be hitting on him so hard even if he didn't stand a chance in hell with a guy like him.

Chapter 10

It was very early when Julian woke up in the armchair in Danny's room. Julian was rubbing his neck, and Danny was already up, playing quietly on the rug next to his bed.

"Good morning," Julian told him.

"You're awake. Good morning, Julian. I heard Rob," Danny told him.

"He must be up too. I'll be right back, OK?" Julian told him and leaned down to kiss the top of his head.

Out in the hallway, Julian saw Rob coming up the stairs. "I have coffee on. Good morning."

"Good morning. Thanks for taking care of things," Julian said and he went to the master bedroom to get ready and tried not to dwell on how nice it was to have him here and see him first thing in the morning.

He came out with his phone in hand, reading a text about the furniture delivery. On the way back to Danny's room, he saw that Rob was hanging out in the doorway. The way he leaned against the doorjamb accentuated his broad shoulders and slim hips, the curve of his ass.

Hadn't Julian been dreaming last night about getting closer to the lean strength of that body, mapping the contours of his muscles? He groaned inwardly. It would be better for his peace of mind if that had been one of those dreams he forgot as soon as he woke up.

When Julian joined him, Danny called their attention to something out the window. Julian could guess what it was, but Rob went over to see.

Danny pointed outside. "There's a big truck."

"The furniture is here early. I wasn't expecting them before breakfast," Julian said. "They're taking away the old furniture and delivering the master bedroom furniture as well as a few things I ordered for Danny's room." Julian smiled at Danny, who was distracted by watching the big truck pull up in front.

"Looking forward to seeing what you got," Rob said with a grin. "I'll go open the front doors and Danny and I can watch them working after he gets dressed. Right?" Rob looked down at Danny, who gave him a tentative nod.

Rob handled the delivery until Julian got Danny ready. Then they switched places so Julian could direct the setup of the new furniture.

This morning, Danny wasn't as brave as he was last night. Holding on to Rob's hand, he watched the furniture being carried. He seemed amazed by the show of strength, repeating, "Super strong!" as the men

passed by.

Once it was all done and tips handed out, Danny was curious to see Julian's room. He stared at the simple, dark stained, shaker style furniture blankly, like he didn't understand what the fuss was about, but it got Rob's approval.

"That's nice. Suits the house and it suits you," Rob said with a nod. "But those guys made me feel like I need to go lift some weights right now."

"You are in great shape," Julian said and hoped it didn't sound inappropriate. His thoughts echoed his dream and that was definitely inappropriate.

"What do you say, Danny? Am I super strong?" Rob asked him.

Danny looked at him thoughtfully. "I don't know."

Now Rob turned to Julian. "See. I need to pump some iron until the answer is yes."

Julian shook his head and offered his hand to Danny. "Let's go see what they put in your room."

In there, a new colorful desk was sitting under the window instead of that old, dark one. Julian was ready to transform that room, but Danny had already grown attached to a few things, like the striped comforter, and he wanted to keep the round, brass lamp. To tempt him, he got him a new striped comforter with bees and beehives on it.

More things were waiting to be unwrapped, including two new lamps. One was a classic one in the shape of the spinning globe, the other with the solar system on metal bands.

They unrolled a round, green, yellow and blue rug with frogs jumping and sitting on lily pads. Rob set up a chalkboard that came with a box of colored chalk, and he wrote Danny's name on it in big letters. More cheerful than before, the room already looked more like a child's room should.

The rest of what Julian ordered were just framed, funny posters of animals like a crocodile with a bird perched on its nose, a zebra sitting down, and a giraffe with its head sticking out through the top of a tree.

"We'll just lean them here and put them up later," Julian said and he lined them up against one wall.

"I can do that, with Danny's help of course," Rob volunteered.

Danny wasn't in any hurry. He sat on his new rug in front of the pictures and got the animal book out so he could look for the animals from the posters.

"He's busy," Rob said to Julian then he spoke to Danny. "You hang out here, then. I'll be in the kitchen getting some coffee. I'll get you when it's time for breakfast."

He and Julian went downstairs together. Julian was sure it wouldn't

take Danny long to follow them down. He had the urge to hover near his little brother all the time, but he knew that wasn't smart. He wanted Danny to develop some independence.

Instead of going to his office, Julian decided to get some coffee and hover in the kitchen instead. "It's cereal for breakfast today or we can order in," Julian said and looked at Rob.

"Cereal is fine by me. I'll get the bowls," Rob said as he opened a few cupboards until he found them.

"None for me. I'm not hungry," Julian told him.

Rob gave him a disapproving glance over his shoulder. "You need to set a good example for Danny," he said and set out a bowl for him too.

Julian couldn't argue with what he said, and he was defenseless against the stern, furrowed brows over his green eyes. There probably wasn't anything he wouldn't agree to if Rob simply turned those eyes on him.

So as not to dwell on what he wanted Rob to ask of him, Julian talked about his little brother. "When Danny first came to live with me, he wasn't a good eater. He did much better when I ate with him. I guess I shouldn't get complacent just because he's doing better."

"And the fact that you need food doesn't enter into it," Rob said and made him laugh.

It was so odd to have him here and not to feel like there was a stranger in the house. Rob's natural confidence was part of the reason. Though he was hesitant from time to time, Julian could see so much strength in him. It first became evident when he confronted Thayer, and it was Thayer who came away intimidated, not Rob. Since then Julian's trust in him had been building as if he'd known him forever.

That was one reason he wanted to change his plans for today. "I was thinking about our trip to Ashbury to meet Danny's new therapist," Julian said to him while he poured them both coffee. Originally he planned to leave Rob to handle things in the office. Now he had something else in mind. "I'm going to look into getting a dog for Danny."

"There is an animal shelter in Asbury. You can have a look-see today. Two birds with one stone," Rob jumped in to say.

Julian smiled. "You did research already. I did too."

"I saw how Danny was with those dogs. He's still a little unsure with the kids, but when it comes to those dogs, that was pure happiness," Rob said.

"It was, wasn't it? We'll go after we see the therapist."

Rob stopped as he was shaking out cereal into the bowls, no doubt surprised that Julian was moving ahead with it just like that. Then he asked, "You want me along?"

It was exactly what Julian wanted, and he almost said, "Of course. I

always want you with us." Instead he gave Rob a more measured answer. "If you don't mind. Danny is nervous about meeting the child psychologist. Having you along well help a lot."

"And what are you telling him about the dog mission?" Rob wondered pulling a carton of milk from the fridge and bringing it to the table.

"I don't want to keep it a secret. Danny is nervous about the drive and meeting Dr. Vallarta. It will give him something to look forward to," Julian said, thinking out loud. "I won't tell him that we're looking for a dog to adopt in case it doesn't work out."

Julian was still making up his mind about exactly what to say when Danny poked his head into the sizable kitchen and peered at them.

"Hey, Danny. I just found out I'll be going with you guys to Ashbury," Rob told him.

Danny's eyes lit up at the news, so Julian went ahead and told him what else they would be doing in Ashbury. "While we're there, we'll go see Dr. Vallarta first then we'll go and visit some dogs."

"Doggies?" Danny said, his eyes going wide.

"They have a place in Ashbury where they have dogs," Rob said.

"I want to see the doggies!" Danny said with breathless excitement.

"We're all going to see the doggies," Julian told him and called him over to the table. "Now let's have breakfast."

It wasn't long before breakfast was finished and they were all in the car with Rob in the back to make sure Danny was doing OK. Coming down from the hill road and going toward Ashbury, they passed Mitch and Rico as they drove up. After waving to them, they drove on.

Soon they neared the turnoff toward the elementary school and saw all the kids they knew clustered together, wearing colorful backpacks. Wyatt was with them so he must have been walking them to school. Since Danny was looking over there eagerly, Julian turned the car to drive toward the school. He pulled the car over so Danny could say hi.

"You guys going for a drive?" Wyatt asked.

"We are," Julian told him.

"You kids on your way to school?" Rob asked the kids as he rolled down the car window on Danny's side and leaned over.

A chorus of answers from the kids confirmed it. Then Riley asked. "Where are you going, Danny?"

Danny leaned forward to answer him, "We're going to the other town, where they have the doggies!"

"We're going to Ashbury," Rob told them since they seemed puzzled by this town full of doggies.

"That's over there," Sammy said, and she and the other kids all pointed in different directions while Wyatt shook his head. "I went

there lots of times, but I never saw any doggies."

"Me neither," Riley chimed in. "I only saw one dog and another dog."

The adults tried to make sense of his nonsensical claim then gave up. But Danny didn't like what he was hearing. He frowned at Rob and Julian worriedly.

"We'll find where they keep the doggies. Don't worry," Rob reassured him.

"I know where it is and how to get there," Julian told Danny and gave him a smile.

"Good luck, guys," Wyatt told them. He could probably figure out why they were going to look at the doggies, but knew not to say anything. "Lets get you to school. You guys have a lot to learn, like geography."

"Have a good day at school," Rob said to the kids and they all waved. Danny waved back even after he couldn't see them any more.

"I don't go to school," Danny said once he was done waving.

"But you will," Rob told him.

"With everyone?" Danny wondered.

"Yes, with everyone. You'll have lots of fun," Rob told him.

Until now, Julian expected Danny to be apprehensive about school, but seeing all those kids going there together made him want to go too. That was very different from the way he had been at daycare, where the unkind children made him shrink back inside himself.

Judging by his own unhappy experience at school, Julian had assumed that it might always be like that for Danny too. That was obviously a mistake. He couldn't let his own skewed expectations cast a shadow over his little brother.

Glancing into the rearview mirror, Julian caught Rob's eye. Looking into those deep, green eyes, Julian felt that Rob was the key to him finding his way. If Rob would only stay with them, live the small town life a little longer despite the kind of social life he must be missing, Julian knew everything would turn out well.

Ashbury was significantly bigger than Peach Tree, but not so big that they could easily get lost in it. They found Dr. Vallarta's office easily and were soon sitting in the colorful waiting room.

"I'll go in first," Julian said to Danny when the receptionist told him he could go in. "You stay here with Rob. I'll be back soon."

Going inside the bright and cheerful office, he found that Dr. Vallarta was fairly young for a psychologist. She carried herself confidently and greeted Julian with a firm handshake and a warm smile. They sat to talk for a while and Julian eyed the play area, where she would probably be talking to Danny.

"I've been in touch with Danny's previous therapist. Dr Sadler sings

your praises," she told him.

"He does?" Julian said as he turned back to face her.

"He saw a marked improvement once you entered Danny's life," she said.

"Danny is coming out of his shell more every day. And today we'll be visiting an animal shelter to see if we can adopt a dog. He did well when he met some dogs from the neighborhood. You don't see a problem with that, do you?" It was a question in form only and Dr. Vallarta noticed.

"You don't want to hear any objections to this, do you?" she said and raised an eyebrow at him.

"No," he admitted. "Danny doesn't know we're adopting, only that we're visiting some dogs, so we'll see how it goes."

"As long as you don't rush into anything, it should be fine," Dr. Vallarta said and made some sort of note.

"I don't rush in as a general rule," Julian said, but he could think of a recent job offer he made at record speed. And he invited Rob to move in as well, like he had to grab the man for himself right then and there.

That's not what he told Dr. Vallarta as he described Danny's current living situation and that Rob was helping with him. They went over a few more things, then Julian went to get Danny.

The little guy was still apprehensive, but his reaction to Dr. Vallarta was generally positive. Still, Julian had a feeling he wouldn't be too chatty his first time speaking with her.

Waiting outside with Rob, Julian was antsy and had to read the emails he was going over several times. Rob wasn't much better. At one point he huffed and said, "With this and the animal shelter, I feel like I'm going to have to keep my fingers crossed all day today."

"So I need to reassure you?" Julian asked with a grin.

Rob mumbled something in reply, and Julian could swear he said something about holding his hand. No. He must have misheard.

Once the session was over and Danny ran out, Rob seemed as relieved as Julian.

"Are we gonna go see the doggies?" Danny asked.

"Yes, we are," Julian told him, while he watched for any signs that he was upset. He seemed fine, just obsessed with the doggies.

When Julian had a few words with Dr. Vallarta, she told him, "It's remarkable that he has already made some friends."

"So he told you. I think we lucked into meeting some nice people," Julian told her.

Since it was only his first session, Dr. Vallarta seemed cautiously optimistic and told Julian to take things slowly. New they were free to go and Danny couldn't wait to get to the animal shelter.

Located on a little traveled street, Ashbury Animal Shelter was tucked away behind a carpet store and an insurance office. The place was pretty small. Julian wasn't sure they could find the right dog for Danny there.

As they went in, the woman sitting at the only desk was on the phone and looking at a computer monitor at the same time. While they waited and looked around, Danny was nervous and Julian was too. Rob pointed out the corkboard on one wall, which featured photos of pets and people as well as thank you letters and postcards. The proof of happy adoptions raised Julian's hopes a little.

Danny peered all around. "Where are the doggies?" They could hear them barking, though it didn't sound like there were a lot of them.

"I think they're in the back," Julian told him.

The woman on the phone, whose nameplate read Devina and nothing more, covered the mouthpiece and asked them, "You here to meet some little friends?"

"We are," Julian told her.

"I'll be right with you." Soon she was off the phone and showing them into an area in the back. "Meet the kids," she said and waved the three of them toward the pens and cages in there.

Only a few animals were in the cages. Most were in the pens and getting along OK. With Julian holding his hand, Danny peered at the cats then the dogs then settled himself in front of one cage and wouldn't budge.

Signs warned them that there was no petting allowed, not to reach inside the pens or cages, and not too feed the animals. Rob told Danny about the rules but he didn't need the warnings. He didn't try to do any of those things. He just stared at the Yorkie in the cage in front of him while the little dog barked at him and pawed at the cage door. As the dog tried to push its nose through the gaps in the cage, Devina came over and crossed her arms as she eyed Danny.

"Has that little guy made his choice already?" she said in wonder.

"I guess so. Can you tell me about that dog?" Julian asked as he went over to stand with her a little away from Danny, Rob and the little dog. He was worried there might be some problem and he didn't want Danny to overhear.

"His name is Lenny, and he's a sweetheart. We just got him. His mommy passed recently. She was old and frail. He misses her, but he is very friendly," Devina said.

"Why is he in the cage?" Julian wondered.

"Just 'cause he's new. We want to make sure the newbies can get along. You think you might want him?" she asked.

"I think so. Is there a procedure with approval and a home visit?"

Julian asked.

"We don't have the people for that. You want him, you get to take him home," she said. "There is a fee, you understand. It helps to keep this place running."

That seemed too easy. "That's no problem, but we can take him home today? Really?"

"We don't get that many people coming in here. We will need some references though," she said, so there was an obstacle.

"Do they need to be local references?" Julian wondered.

"That's what we like," Devina told him.

"We only just moved here," Julian said. Mrs. York, the orchard attendant, could be a reference, but she worked for him and he hated to bother her while she was out of town. Other than her, Julian had kept in contact with the sheriff and a few other people but not in person.

"You do know a few people," Rob pointed out as he came over. He must have overheard and now he was making a list of who they knew. "Mitch and Rico, Lara, Noreen, the Hayes's, Mrs. Del Rio."

"You know Mrs. Del Rio. 'Nuff said," Devina told them.

"A reference from her would work?" Julian asked.

"Sure will. Let me call her up," Devina said and went out front again to sit at her desk. "What's your name?"

"Julian Brenner," he said as he followed her and left Danny in Rob's care. He overheard Devina talking to Mrs. Del Rio at length, laughing it up with her. Once she was done, she got down to the paperwork, handing Julian a clipboard and made a copy of his ID.

While Julian filled out forms, the dog was let out of the cage and put on a leash, so Danny could get introduced to him.

"This is Lenny. Say hi to him," Devina said to Danny.

"We're going to take him home and he's going to be your dog. Do you think you can take care of him?" Julian asked.

"Yes," Danny said but he looked overwhelmed by the awesome responsibility.

"Don't worry. Julian and I will help," Rob told him.

"Yes, we will. Do you want to say hi to Lenny?" Julian asked and took him closer to the tiny dog.

Danny crouched in front of the dog, who rose up to rest his front paws on Danny's knees.

"Hi, Lenny. I'm Danny. I'm gonna be your friend," he whispered to the little dog and Julian wanted to cry.

Rob was right next to him and he nudged Julian with his shoulder. "Love at first sight," he said.

Julian could only nod. Seeing Danny already smitten with that little dog and having Rob beside him combined to choke him up with

emotion. Though he couldn't speak, Julian knew he had to hold it together.

As they watched Danny with the dog and waited for Devina to print up some paperwork and instructions, Rob shook his head. "I can't believe it. Do we really get to take him home?" he asked like he was the kid.

"It looks like it," Julian told him with an amused smile. He expected a lot more red tape, but he wasn't going to question the shelter's methods if it got them Lenny to take home right away.

"We'll have to do some shopping," Rob said.

"There is a pet store not too far from here," Julian said after looking it up on his phone.

"Oh and they let you bring dogs inside a pet store, right?" Rob asked. "This will be great."

"I get the distinct impression that you wanted a dog when you were a kid," Julian said to him.

"Yeah, but we never had one. My mom was afraid of them." Rob looked so sad, and it wasn't about not having a dog. Julian had noticed that his expression turned sad any time he mentioned his mom.

The shopping trip was a big hit with Danny, especially the toys they got for Lenny. They grabbed lunch on the go, and Danny let Lenny eat some dry dog food from his hand. That made Julian worry, but Danny laughed and looked so happy.

Back in the car, Rob got to hold Lenny in the back seat. They didn't want to put him in the crate they got.

Danny leaned over from his car seat and kissed the dog on the head. "That's like Julian kissing my head." He pointed to his own head then turned to Rob. "You can kiss Lenny too," Danny said generously.

"Oh, I can," Rob said then he did. "He's nice and soft."

As soon as they got home, Julian went straight to his office to attend to business, and Rob and Danny took Lenny for his first walk. Julian wished he could go with them, but he had work to catch up on.

"What did I miss?" Julian asked when Rob came into the office after their walk.

"Danny is watching Lenny drinking his water. He can't get enough of that dog. I took pictures of their first walk," Rob told him then he came around to his side of the desk and showed him his phone. "Here's Lenny sniffing your car. I think he wanted to pee on a tire or two, but we didn't let him. Here's Danny making a face while Lenny does his business."

As Rob kept showing him more and more pictures from just one

short walk, Julian had to ask, "How many did you take?"

"I couldn't help it," Rob said then he showed him some more. "Here is a picture of Danny and Lenny and here is Lenny and Danny."

"You covered all the bases," Julian told him while being very aware of Rob leaning over him, their heads close as they looked at the rest of the photos.

"I'll upload them for you," Rob said, finally reaching the end.

"Thank you," Julian said as Rob left to go check on Danny and his new friend.

Now that Rob wasn't standing so close to him, Julian let out a long breath. What he was feeling wasn't relief though. It was more like regret. He could breathe easier now, but he would rather still be in that moment of tension, not breathing, so close to Rob that his scent and his body heat were inescapable.

Chapter 11

Lenny was sniffing at everything in the library, and Danny had been instructed not to let him chew on anything or pee on anything. From the office, Rob and Julian kept an eye on the two of them while they worked.

Julian might have told Rob to use the big office, but Rob spent most of his time in the smaller office with him or with Danny and his new buddy. Rob was fine with that. Being close to Julian didn't make doing his job easier, but he couldn't deny himself the thrill of temptation.

In late afternoon, they were done with work and it was time to take Lenny for another walk. This time Julian came with them.

"Lenny made a stinky," Danny announced and pointed to it in the grass.

"Oh, man," Rob said as he got the bag ready, but Julian took it from him.

"I'll deal with it.

"You have the best big brother in the world," Rob told Danny.

Danny nodded and beamed at Julian, who looked kind of nauseous as he picked up the fresh dog deposit.

When they got to the house, Julian washed his hands for about an hour straight. Coming over to where Lenny was drinking from his brand new dog bowl while Rob and Danny stood watch, Julian frowned at his phone then he sighed.

"We have an invitation to drop by Mitch and Rico's," Julian announced. "I was texting with Mitch about the work over here, and I mentioned the new dog. Then he mentioned it to Rico, and now we have to go over to their house or else. What do you say?" Julian raised those pretty, brown eyes to Rob.

"I don't see why not," Rob said then he consulted Danny. "You want to show Sammy your new dog?"

Danny was eager to show him off.

"We can stop by their house and then go out to dinner," Julian said. "Or maybe get takeout?"

"We can play it by ear," Rob said as they both looked down at Lenny. "I'll go get ready."

"All three of us should go get ready," Julian said but Danny held up four fingers.

"It's four. Four. We have Lenny," Danny reminded him.

"Four. Right," Julian said with a smile.

Driving down a long driveway, they arrived in front of a two-story

house where Rico, Mitch and Sammy were waiting for them in front. Sammy was already jumping with excitement as they got out of the car.

Plastic Halloween pumpkins were lined up on the porch but not lit. "It's Halloween here already," Rob said as they went up to introduce Lenny.

"They're friendly pumpkins. They won't scare you," Sammy said. She seemed to be talking to Lenny, but she was right. Their jack o'lantern faces were pretty goofy looking.

Lenny had proved to be pretty easy to manage, so Julian let Danny hold his leash as he was introduced. "His name is Lenny," Danny said as Sammy got down for a close look.

"I like him. He's nice," Sammy said and Danny was pleased. Lenny was pretty happy too, jumping between them.

"Lenny wants to be friends with you," Danny told her.

"He needs something for his hair. He can have my scrunchie." Sammy took off the small scrunchie that held a little bit of her hair to one side. Mitch helped her put it on the dog. It made Lenny's hair stick up but it kept it out of his eyes. "You can keep it, Lenny," she said to the dog.

"So you got a little dog," Mitch said as he crouched in front of Lenny. When he rose up on his back legs, Mitch held his paws.

"How did you pick him?" Rico asked as he got down and petted the dog.

"He was talking to me," Danny told him.

"He was?"

"Mostly he said yip, yip, yip," Rob said and Danny nodded.

"Come meet the cats," Rico told them.

With the kids and Lenny leading the way, they followed a wrap around porch to the back of the house.

"That little guy seems like he's going to be a really good fit," Mitch said as he watched the dog trotting along between the kids.

"I wanted a small, friendly dog for Danny. And we got exactly that with Lenny," Julian said.

"You sure did," Rico said. "Mitch could carry him around in his pocket."

"Don't look down on that dog," Rob told him.

"How do I not look down on him? He doesn't even come up to my ankles," Rico claimed.

"He is going to be good company for Danny. That's all that matters," Julian told him.

On the back porch, they stopped by a screen door that led into the kitchen. Sammy went and opened the door to let out two orange cats. Right away they headed straight for Lenny who was straining to go

meet up with them as well.

"Not so fast," Rob said and Danny got down to hold Lenny back.

Sammy sat on the porch steps and the cats came over to her. She pointed to each of them. "That's Natalie. That's Veronica. They're good kitties, but they try to eat anybody that's littler than them," she warned Danny then she leaned down to stare at their little cat faces. They mewed and got nose to nose with her. "Don't try to eat Lenny. I know he's little, but don't try to eat him."

While Sammy instructed the cats, Danny looked alarmed and hugged the little dog protectively.

"They won't eat him," Mitch assured him.

Sammy confirmed it. "That's right. I told them not to."

They let the pets get acquainted a little bit, and Rob remembered to take pictures. One picture was of Julian holding two cats while they both peered at him like they were in love. Of course they were. They had eyes.

Mitch had built an enclosure for the cats and he set it up on the back porch so they could stay out. They seemed to be content to sit and stare out at them while Lenny got all the attention.

Julian was talking to Mitch about renovations and Rico got busy texting. Rob was thinking that they would be leaving soon to go to dinner.

While Sammy was telling Danny how kitties drink with their tongues too, Lenny looked up at them attentively.

"He's listening," Sammy said. "Tell him something."

Danny got tongue tied so Rob helped him out. "Tell Lenny he's a good dog."

"You're a good dog," Danny said and Lenny arfed in reply. "He's always saying arf."

After thinking about it a little bit, Sammy had it translated. "It means 'I like you'."

Danny took her word for it. "You like me, Lenny? I like you too."

"Now he's happy!" Sammy told Danny.

Julian was saying how they needed to go and have dinner when Rico dismissed that idea. "You're eating with us. After we got you here, you think we're letting you get away?"

"It might not sound like it, but we're not kidnappers," Mitch said. "We would like you to stay for dinner."

Julian looked at Danny having so much fun and that decided it. But he still asked Rob, "What would you like to do?"

"We won't get a better offer," Rob told him with a grin and Julian nodded.

Mitch and Rico uncovered a grill and then they all heard a

commotion out front. Running around the corner, Riley and DJ couldn't wait to see Lenny, and the little dog was excited to see them too.

"I might have texted a few people," Rico admitted.

Coming over more slowly, Wyatt was forced to wait for his turn to meet the dog. He got his chance when the kids all wanted to get a bowl of water for Lenny.

"Four kids getting one bowl of water. That's how it's done," Wyatt said as he got down to greet Lenny. He let Lenny sniff his hand then deftly avoided getting his face licked. "What's this young lady's name?"

"Lenny is a boy dog," Sammy informed him as she came out carrying a bowl of water together with Danny. None of the water made it over to Lenny. Good thing Mitch was following with a bottle of water, which he was forced to surrender to Riley. Then all the kids helped pour the water and some of it made it into the bowl.

"Yes, I got all that on video," Rico bragged then all the kids clamored to see it.

"Instant replay?" Rob said to Julian.

"I still have to catch up on some work emails," Julian said. "I was hoping to do that over dinner."

"That's not the life you're living right now," Rob told him as Mitch handed them each a beer.

"Sniffing is how dogs make friends," DJ was saying as Lenny was over by the screened in area, sniffing at one of the cats.

"You're friends with everybody," Danny whispered to Lenny.

Riley disagreed. "Not with everybody. He has to make friends with Barney and Brownie."

"We'll have to introduce them one of these days," Wyatt said then he saw that the grill had been uncovered. "Is there a barbeque in Lenny's honor?"

"In honor of the new dog, we're having hotdogs. Sam is bringing them when he comes by," Rico said.

"So we find ourselves at another party," Julian said.

"I noticed that. It's their fault," Rob said as he pointed at the other guys. They were busy around the grill giving Rob and Julian a moment to themselves.

Lenny was keeping the kids entertained, so Rob and Julian strolled the tree-lined back yard. "It's nice here," Julian said.

The late afternoon air was cooling as the sun hovered above the horizon. A breeze stirred the treetops and sent leaves fluttering to the ground. Rob caught one as it came down and found that he held all the colors of autumn in his hand in that one leaf.

It was pretty, but Rob knew he was staring at it to avoid staring at

Julian. That he was in the periphery of Rob's vision was more than enough to stir his imagination. He pictured him and Julian out there alone, rolling around in the autumn leaves. They would unzip each other and...

The kids were shrieking and running after Lenny. The little dog had spotted two new arrivals rounding the corner of the house. That was Lara and Gloria coming over so the little redhead could squeal over the new dog too. She joined the kids. Lara only waved hi to Julian and Rob then went over to see what the other guys were up to.

Before going off, she gave Rob and Julian a smile, like she knew better than to interrupt them. What did they look like to her? They weren't doing anything, just meandering over the yard. It's not like they were holding hands.

By the time they joined her and the others, she was already armed with a beer. "You didn't bring your dogs?" Lara asked Wyatt.

"We thought it might be too much since Lenny is new," Wyatt said. "The boys will tell them all about the new dog in town."

"Where's your girlfriend?" Rob asked her.

Lara shook her head at Rico. "Now see what you've done." She then addressed Rob. "If you mean Noreen, she's not my girlfriend."

"Not yet," Rico said.

"We're just friends," Lara said. "And let this be a lesson to you never to listen to a thing Rico says."

Now Rob gave Rico a sideways look.

Rico shrugged. "They just won't see reason. I did invite Noreen. I said hotdogs. She said, 'Eh.'"

"Her grandmother is cooking dinner," Lara told him, but now it was Rob's turn to be questioned. "So you and Julian are work friends?" Lara asked though the look in her eyes said she thought they were more than that. Maybe that was Rico's doing too.

"I've only worked for Julian for a few days," Rob informed her.

"Oh. I was sure... I guess looks can be deceiving," she said with a shrug and a mischievous smile. She spotted the kittens and went to baby talk to them.

"We stick too close together," Julian said to Rob under his breath.

Rob felt a pang but then he realized that was just as much Julian's fault. "Want to split up?" Rob challenged him.

"No. Safety in numbers," Julian said while looking straight ahead.

"They're going to think we're a couple," Rob pointed out to him.

"I'll take that chance," Julian said and his voice cracked a little.

Rob tried to figure him out, but then all the kids ran over clamoring for attention.

"We have to bring leaves to school. Teacher said," Riley explained. "We have to go in the forest."

"You want to go in the forest at night? What if bears eat you?" Wyatt asked Riley.

Sammy gasped and covered Danny's ears. Then Gloria did too.

To get his attention, DJ pulled on Wyatt's jacket sleeve. "You'll scare Danny."

"Oh. I was just kidding," Wyatt said to reassure Danny. "I was talking about teddy bears. Big, fluffy teddy bears."

"I'm not scared. I have Lenny," Danny told him.

"He'll protect you?" Wyatt said eyeing the little dog doubtfully.

Danny nodded and gave Lenny a look of complete faith.

Leaning closer to Rob, Julian whispered in alarm, "Did you hear him? He thinks he's ready to go off on a wilderness adventure just because he got a tiny dog."

Smiling, Rob looked from the overprotective big brother to the little duo. They were both so tiny, who wouldn't want to protect them.

"You guys don't need to go into any forest. We have plenty of leaves out here," Mitch said and pointed to the fenced in back yard, which had plenty of fallen leaves to choose from.

"Does that mean we won't have to rake?" Rico asked.

"Depends on how many the kids pick up," Mitch told him deadpan.

"You're not that lazy, are you?" Rob asked him.

Rico faced him with is chin raised. "Is that a challenge?" He then got distracted when Mitch put an arm around his waist.

"Are you and Lenny going to look for some leaves too?" Rob asked Danny.

"We don't go to school," Danny said speaking for both himself and the dog.

"You and Lenny can still find some good leaves for me and Julian. We like leaves," Rob told him. Julian agreed with that and nodded.

"OK. Look for the good ones, Lenny," Danny told the dog.

Wyatt put a hand on DJ's shoulder and told him. "DJ, you're the oldest so you look after Danny and Lenny."

"No. Me," Sammy said.

"I'll do it," Riley volunteered.

"Me, me, me!" Gloria said and jumped up and down with her hand raised.

Wyatt gave up and put his hands up in surrender. "You can all look after them." But as they went off he gave DJ a wink to let him know he was really the one in charge.

Before seeing these kids in action, no one would think collecting a few leaves would be so noisy or competitive. There was yelling and running and some debate about climbing trees. Danny was the quietest, consulting with Lenny about every leaf.

Running over, Sammy showed Mitch a leaf bouquet she had made. "Look, Daddy! It's like flowers!"

"Are they for me?" Mitch asked.

"Yes," Sammy said and she smiled and gave them to him. Then Mitch pretended to smell them and she giggled.

Looking on, Gloria gasped. "I have to make one for Momma," she said in a panic and ran off.

"I'll make one for Rico," Sammy yelled and she ran off too.

A little later, Sam showed up with a big thermos and some shopping bags. He went to kiss Wyatt hello first then held out the bags to Rico. "Here are your hotdogs and buns," he said giving them to Rico.

"Let's get to work," Rico said to Mitch.

"Nice to see you guys again," Sam said to Rob and Julian. "I could have gotten something else, but Rico insisted on hotdogs.

"What else would you eat in honor of a new dog?" Rico said as he eyed the thermos Rico brought.

"This is some roasted red pepper cream soup from the café. I'll need some mugs. Where is the new dog?" Sam asked, not seeing him in the cluster of kids.

"The kids are collecting leaves for school and Danny and Lenny are helping them," Rob told him. "Do you need any help with the soup or anything?"

Sam's eyes flicked over to Julian and he said, "No. I can manage."

As he went inside, Rob was left to wonder if he imagined that Sam just refused his help so he wouldn't take him away from Julian. Was there a rumor about them or maybe Rob had been sticking too close to Julian, like he said.

He considered going to talk to Wyatt or Lara, who were both now cuddling the cats on the porch steps. Or maybe he could go over to Rico and Mitch at the grill. Or he could stay right where he was, next to Julian, wanting to touch him and kiss him but knowing that he couldn't do either.

Backing out through the screen door, Sam came out with a tray of mugs full of creamy soup. He carried them over like a professional. "The ones with the spice mix on top are for us. It's too much heat for the kids. But the soup isn't too hot," he said this while looking at Julian. He knew who was the overprotective one among them.

They called the kids over and handed out the mugs.

"Orange juice and soup too?" Danny said as he looked from his mug to Rob.

"You can drink lots of things from a mug," Rob told him.

It was Sam's turn to get acquainted with Lenny, and being a sweet,

kind soul, he had nothing snarky to say about the little dog. "What a perfect little dog for Danny," he said.

Done with their soup, the kids clustered around the grill to watch the hotdogs going on the fire.

"Can I flip them?" Riley asked Mitch.

Mitch regarded the eager, little dude out of the corner of his eye. "When you're older," Mitch told him.

Riley made a face then he tattled on his uncle. "Uncle Wyatt made corn on the barbeque and he burned it."

"It wasn't burned, it was roasted," Wyatt said.

Riley looked up at him stubbornly then he sing-songed, "Buuuurned iiit."

Wyatt moved like he was going to get him for that, and Riley screamed and took off running and laughing.

"No one is chasing you, Ry," his big brother yelled since Wyatt wasn't coming after him, but the little guy just kept running. Seeing his brother sprinting away, DJ hung his head and sighed. "Now we have to go catch him."

All the kids took off chasing after Riley and yelling. Danny too with Lenny running alongside him.

"Kids got to do what kids got to do," Wyatt said as they all went running and screaming all over the yard.

"God, you're such a troublemaker," Sam said coming up behind his husband and setting down some hotdog toppings on the outdoor table.

Grabbing him around the waist, Wyatt kissed him. "You love that about me," Wyatt claimed, and Sam didn't deny it, just smiled at him.

"Break it up," Rico told them. "Hotdogs don't take all day to cook. Get those kids back here so they can eat."

Lara gave him a sly look. "Settle down, honey. You'll have a husband of your own one of these days. Unless someone steals him away from you."

Rico's head snapped around and he glared at her. "What? Are you saying your sister is coming back to visit?"

"One of these days," Lara said breezily.

Mitch groaned. "You're all troublemakers."

Rob and Julian looked at each other, wondering what that was all about. Being a little bit of a trouble-maker at heart, Rob was tempted to ask. But he didn't think Julian would enjoy the fireworks, so he satisfied himself with a raised eyebrow at Rico.

"No one can steal Mitch from me," Rico insisted then looked at Mitch to confirm it.

"I'm yours forever," Mitch told him and gave him a lingering kiss. "Now help me serve up these hotdogs."

"That's the level of romance you're supposed to save up for after

you're married," Lara told them.

As the kids were called over and they lined up for their hotdogs, Rob took a moment to whisper to Julian. "You have an in with Rico. Find out what that's about."

Julian gave him a disbelieving look then he narrowed his pretty, brown eyes. "Are you looking for ammunition?"

"Maybe," Rob said with a shrug.

"You fit right in," Julian accused him then gave him a sad smile. Did Julian think that he didn't fit in with these guys?

"Danny didn't get a hotdog yet, Daddy," Sammy complained.

"He's next. I promise," Mitch told her.

"You didn't get one either," Rico pointed out to her.

"But Danny is littler. He needs to eat more," Sammy explained.

DJ saw her point, so he held out his hotdog to Danny. "You can have mine, I didn't bite it," DJ offered.

"I bited mine but you can have it," Riley said sticking out his as well, though he had taken a big, sloppy bite out of it already and had ketchup and mustard on his face to prove it.

"Yours is no good, Ry," DJ told him.

"Mine is better. It has more ketchup," Gloria said and tried to give him her hotdog too.

"Guys, don't fight. Danny will get his own hotdog," Mitch told them.

"I'm making sure the hotdogs aren't too hot for you guys," Sam told them. He was the one holding up the process as he put on the toppings.

Rob pointed to him and told Julian, "There you go. Sam is your kind of guy."

"Taken," Julian said under his breath.

Rob's eyes flashed to him and he caught himself glaring at Julian. Was he being possessive of him? Fuck. That was stupid. Since they were off to one side and not likely to be overheard, Rob couldn't help questioning him, "So Sam is your type?"

Julian shrugged. "Not exactly. I just like that he's so kind and dependable."

Hearing that, Rob's heart sank. Twenty-six and still juggling short term jobs and wondering how long he could hang on to each place where he lived, he was the opposite of dependable. Damn.

The hotdogs were all gone and once again the kids were running around all over the yard with Lenny. The adults weren't as energetic. Sunset came on fast so now they were hanging out in the cool evening air under the glow of several porch lights.

As Rob and Julian sat together on the porch steps, they saw Mrs. Del Rio and her big, blond hairdo making their way over to them. She was

carrying a big Tupperware container and Rico demanded, "What kind of half baked, monstrosity did you bring us?"

"It's all baked," his grandmother told him as he kissed her on the cheek. "It's pineapple upside down cake. Something sweet for the sweet babies."

"Cake from a box. Pineapples from a can," Rico guessed as Mrs. Del Rio handed the cake to Mitch.

"Then I suppose you won't be having a slice," his grandmother told him archly then she opened her arms as Sammy came over to her for a hug.

When Mrs. Del Rio told her what kind of cake she brought, Sammy asked eagerly, "With the cherries in the middle?"

"Of course, my sweetheart," Mrs. Del Rio told Sammy and made her happy.

"Maraschino cherries are nothing to brag about," Rico told his grandmother.

"This child loves them," Mrs. Del Rio told him and she and Sammy shared another hug.

"Wanna see Lenny?" Sammy asked her then took her away so all the kids could show her what an amazing creature Lenny was.

Cake was handed out and Mrs. Del Rio was back so Julian thanked her for vouching for him with the animal shelter. "You made Danny very happy."

"Happy to do it. These two little cuties belong together," she said as she smiled down at Danny, who was eating his slice of cake and Lenny, who was alert for any crumbs that might come his way.

"Mrs. Del Rio helped us get Lenny, do you want to thank her?" Julian asked Danny.

Danny looked up at her and said, "Thank you. Do you wanna to kiss Lenny?"

Everyone laughed, but Mrs. Del Rio picked up Lenny and gave him a kiss on the nose. Mrs. Del Rio sighed as the kids finished their dessert and took Lenny away to play with them.

"You got yourself a winner," she said to Julian and then looked over at Rob and winked at him.

Rico noticed. "You still talking about Lenny? And about that name. That dog has a purple scrunchie holding up his hair. Does he look like a Lenny?"

"Devina from the shelter told me about that," Mrs. Del Rio said. "He belonged to an old lady who named him after her favorite, late husband."

Hearing that, Rico sighed. "I guess he can keep the name."

"Thanks for the permission, but that was never up to you," Julian informed him.

"It's all good as long as you're happy with it, Jules," Rico said and hooked an arm over his shoulders.

It was not all good. Rob was ready to drag him off Julian, but one look from Mitch had Rico flying at him for a kiss. "You're gorgeous when you're jealous," Rico growled at his fiancé.

"Kids are present," Sam told them. And for good reason. In two seconds flat, those two had generated some serious heat. Not to be outdone, Wyatt grabbed Sam around the waist and gave him a kiss.

"Getting hot out here," Lara said while Mrs. Del Rio fanned herself.

And what was Rob doing? Glaring at everyone because he couldn't grab Julian and set the whole place on fire.

While Rob was busy being jealous of everyone in sight, Julian had sneaked off to do something on his phone or to run away maybe. When it looked like he was done, Rob went to join him.

"I needed to approve some changes before tomorrow morning," Julian said.

"And I was worried Rico was making you uncomfortable," Rob told him.

"You worry too much about him," Julian said with a smile and Rob grumbled.

He hoped Julian didn't realize why he felt that way. "My friends are already planning their Halloween parties," Rob said as he watched the kids turning on the lights inside the Halloween pumpkins.

"If you want time off to go..." Julian started saying.

"No. I was going to ask what you were planning," Rob told him and wondered why Julian was so eager to let him go.

"I ordered a costume for Danny. It should arrive soon," Julian said.

"What about trick or treating?"

"Oh. I don't really know. I suppose we could stop by a few houses of the people we know," Julian said but he sounded very unsure.

"Let's ask these guys what they have planned," Rob said. For Danny's sake, they had to make the most of a holiday like Halloween.

Julian told everyone that he had a costume for Danny but not Lenny. "I special ordered a bee costume for Danny a while back, but we didn't have Lenny then."

"I think I can make something for the little doggie, if it's not too complicated," Lara said. "I'm pretty much finished with ours."

"Really? Thank you," Julian said. "Danny's bee costume has a striped black and yellow cape. That's all Lenny would need."

It turned out that all the trick or treating was happening in town because the houses were kind of far apart. "It's called Halloween Town. It's like mall trick or treating. The merchants set up trick or treating tables on the sidewalk and people come in with baskets of

treats to give out. Afterwards everyone is coming over to my place to eat. You guys are invited too," Lara said.

"Thank you. We should have you guys over one of these days," Julian told all of them.

"Your house is spooky," Rico hinted. "We're doing it potluck anyway. What do you say? Halloween at your place?"

Everyone looked at Lara. When she shrugged, they turned to Julian and Rob. Rob didn't think he was part of the decision, but Julian looked at him like he had a say. "Sounds good," Rob said and Julian nodded.

"We have a plan," Wyatt said.

"You'll need to deck the place out," Rico told Julian.

"I can get some Halloween decorations," Rob said and got a nod from Julian.

"The more bloody and hideous the better," Rico instructed him.

"No," Rob told him.

"I trust your judgment," Julian said to Rob then eyed Rico pointedly.

When they were ready to go, it was time for the kids to pack up their leaves. Rico got some paper bags and markers and had them write their names on them. Danny held his marker and watched the other kids writing.

"You can just do a drawing," Sam told him.

"Not my name?" Danny said, looking disappointed.

"You can do both," Rob told him. "Julian can help you write your name. And Lenny's too."

With Julian guiding his hand, Danny clumsily wrote Danny and then Lenny.

Now Danny looked happy. Going to the car, he proudly carried the paper bag with the leaves and his and Lenny's names on it. Everyone left at the same time and there was a lot of waving and yelling, "Bye!"

At home, Julian got an urgent call from a client so Rob helped Danny get ready for bed. Danny knew the routine and told Rob and Lenny about it. He was snug in bed when Julian was done and ready to tuck him in.

"Are me and Lenny gonna get a story?" Danny asked as Julian watched Lenny try to climb into bed with him.

Julian helped out the little dog, while Rob got Danny's favorite book. "You still like the *Super Strong Little Bee*, right?"

"Yes," Danny said while putting his arm around Lenny.

"I thought since you had Lenny now..." Rob said handing the book to Julian.

"No. I like everybody," Danny said. "Lenny and *Super Strong Little Bee*

and you and Julian."

Rob was touched to be included. "Oh, OK. Thank you. I like you too," Rob said and made Danny get all shy and hide under the covers.

He came out to ask Rob to stay for the story. Rob sat down on the floor and got ready to listen. About to sit in his usual armchair, Julian changed his mind and sat on the floor too. Soon the room was filled with the sound of Julian's deep, soothing voice reading the book.

That didn't put Danny to sleep though. He was one tough, little customer. Rob got a sweet good night from Danny, and then he went out into the hall while Julian stayed to wait for him to fall asleep. Going to sit on the top step and text for a while, Rob didn't lie to himself. He was there waiting for Julian.

A short time later, Julian was there. Rob was going to get up, but Julian lowered himself down to sit next to him. "He's already asleep with Lenny right next to him," Julian said while a smile played on his lips.

"He went down fast after all."

"It's no wonder. It was such a busy day for him," Julian said. "For all of us actually. A welcome party for Lenny on top of everything. I'm still not sure how it happened."

"They probably do that kind a thing a lot," Rob said. "There aren't a lot of places to go around here, right? These guys have to make their own fun."

"That makes sense, I guess," Julian said.

"Danny was so happy to get to show off Lenny to everyone. And you have Halloween plans," Rob reminded him and watched him make a face.

"A Halloween party here," Julian shook his head like he couldn't believe it.

"I'll be pitching in. It won't be so bad," Rob told him and Julian gave him a grateful look.

"The big table in the formal dining room is perfect for potluck," Rob said and Julian laughed and ran his fingers through his dark hair.

"I was picturing my grandfather's reaction to all this. Just for that, it's worth it." Julian's smile then became wry. "My grandfather will turn over in his grave with the house full of tacky, Halloween decorations."

"For Halloween, the tackier the better," Rob told him. "Does that mean another shopping trip or do you just want me to take care of it?"

"Danny will want to go, and..." Julian hesitated before admitting, "I don't want to miss out either."

"That's the spirit," Rob praised him.

"I feel dumb wanting to go," Julian said and lowered his head shyly.

Rob was tempted to tell him how much he liked spending time with him, and he hoped that Julian felt the same way. Not being able to

read Julian, Rob couldn't take the chance that he would push him away.

"Those guys made me feel like... I don't know." Julian rubbed his forehead and sighed. His voice was hushed as he said, "Seeing happiness up close like that..."

"Jealous?" Rob teased him.

"Yes." Julian turned to stare at him very seriously.

His forthright answer surprised Rob. Accusing Julian of being jealous, he was only kidding, but his own jealousy was undeniable. Mostly Rob was jealous that he couldn't have Julian. No matter how much Julian might want something like what those guys had, he wouldn't want it with someone as lowly and unreliable as Rob.

Chapter 12

Breakfast was done and Mitch had arrived to work on the shutters without Rico. "I found this outside your door," Mitch said and handed off a package. While Julian was at his desk, Rob helped Danny unpack it and found his new spaceship and dinosaur sheets inside – just one small part of transforming his grandfather's house. Lenny sniffed the box then allowed Rob to take the sheets. "Lenny approves."

"Can we take them upstairs?" Danny asked.

"You can go with him," Julian told Rob. "It's not too busy here."

"Oh. OK. We'll take these up and put up the animal posters," Rob said.

"Me and Lenny are gonna help," Danny said and they all left together leaving Julian to his graphs and numbers.

Julian could hear them puttering around upstairs and then hammering the nails into the wall. Even that seemed like a happy noise. With Danny here, it was a different house than the one Julian grew up in.

Having Rob here so blond and handsome brightened up the place too. But Julian shouldn't have been thinking about him in that way. He had work to do.

Just as he was getting back to it, he heard Rico announcing himself from the front door. He hadn't arrived with Mitch, but he was here now. A few seconds of peace and quiet while he was probably kissing Mitch hello, and then Rico was poking his head into Julian's office.

"Jules," he said.

"Hi, Rico," Julian told him.

"Where's your boyfriend?" he asked after he looked into the other office and the library and didn't find him.

"You know Rob is not my boyfriend," Julian said, but Rico waved off his denial. "Isn't Mitch keeping you busy enough?"

"All night long," Rico bragged then gestured toward his grandfather's old office. "How come you work in here when you have that big office?"

"I might do something with it," Julian said evasively then he decided to tell Rico a little more. "It was my grandfather's office, and I don't have good memories of him or this place. I only came here for Danny."

"Because he's so skittish? What's that about?" Rico asked becoming uncharacteristically serious. He was also more perceptive than Julian realized.

"Danny was in an accident before he came to live with me. Now he gets scared easily especially by loud noises and cars," Julian told him.

"You picked a quiet spot. The banging we're doing when we're

working won't scare him, will it?" Rico asked, impressing Julian with how thoughtful he was.

"He knows it's you guys. And he and Rob are upstairs making some noise of their own," Julian said.

"Rob is good with him, isn't he?" Rico said back to insinuating something again.

"Yes, he is. Coming back here and bringing Danny to a place that I only remembered with dread... I had a lot of doubts. That made me decide at the last minute to bring Rob with us. I was clutching at straws," Julian confessed.

"No. You were bringing your own fun. You were being smart and wily and not depending on luck," Rico told him.

"I don't know if you're praising me or accusing me," Julian said.

"I'm telling you that you did good. For all three of you," Rico said to make himself clear. "Rob is steady, strong, dependable, hot. What more could an uptight guy like you ask for?" Rico smirked and wiggled his eyebrows.

Knowing what Rico was implying with those wiggling eyebrows, Julian listed one more quality he liked in a prospective lover, "How about not employed by me?"

"What are you talking about? Rob is the perfect man," Rico told him.

Julian was surprised he would praise him like that. "Not for me."

"Yes, for you. I got a man," Rico said with a self-satisfied smirk.

"So when are you and Mitch going to get married?" Julian asked to change the subject.

"Soon. Now," Rico said impatiently then he sighed. "We were thinking we might have a winter wedding, maybe Valentine's. We need to save up for it. My grandmother offered to foot the bill, but we wanted to do it ourselves."

"Isn't it traditional to let relatives pay for the wedding?" Julian asked.

"It's Mitch. That's what he wants, and if it's important to him, then I'm all for it," Rico said and Julian could see how dedicated he was to making Mitch happy.

"I guess you won't be a terrible husband," Julian told him with a smile.

"Watch it or I'll think you like me or something," Rico claimed. "You'll make your boyfriend jealous."

"Do you ever let up?" Julian said.

"This is what you get for being uptight. But that can be a turn on too. Double check with Rob, see if he's into that." With that Rico went off.

As he got back to work, Julian wondered what Rob would think if he could hear the way Rico talked about him. The whole thing reminded Julian about his conversation with Rob last night. Thinking back to sitting with him on the stairs, Julian remembered how easy he was to

talk to and be with. Just sitting with him, Julian wanted to listen to his deep, hushed voice and stay all night in his company.

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Julian had work to do, but he didn't want Rob's help in the office. That left Rob free to do some decorating in Danny's room. They had fun, but Rob didn't like that Julian could do without him so easily.

By the time he went to bed that night, Rob was still worrying about that. Thoughts about having to leave wouldn't let him sleep. He gave up, got out of bed so he could go to that room down the hall and stare at the TV screen for a while.

Stepping into the hallway, Rob saw that the light was on like always. But before he even got there, Rob noticed the light was on inside the sitting room too. Stopping in the doorway, he saw Julian sitting on the sofa with his laptop on his knees and some files by his side and on the coffee table.

Though he was ready to leave him to it, Rob lingered too long. He was staring at Julian's handsome profile and he was spotted. Once Julian turned those pretty, brown eyes on him, he didn't even want to move.

"You can come in," Julian told him.

Rob still hesitated. "I was just going to watch some TV. I don't want to disturb you."

"I told you to use this room. I'm experimenting with leaving Danny alone, but I don't want to be too far in case he comes looking for me. This room is right across the hall. That's why I'm here. You won't bother me if you watch TV," Julian told him.

"If you're sure," Rob said and he went in. He wondered where he would sit when he saw that Julian was clearing space next to him on the sofa. Grabbing the remote, Rob took a seat, leaning into the corner so he wouldn't crowd him. From there he could see that Julian was working. "Is this something urgent? I can help, if you want," he offered.

Once again Julian refused his help. "That's OK. I was just working to keep busy."

"Is working what you do to unwind?" Rob asked.

"Kind of," Julian admitted.

In response, Rob hung his head and groaned. "OK. You're setting that aside and watching TV with me."

To his surprise, Julian agreed easily. "OK."

Julian put the laptop and the files on the coffee table while Rob flipped channels. He stopped when he came across a nature

documentary.

"Is this for me?" Julian asked him.

"I had a hunch you might like something like this," Rob said.

The documentary was about the tundra, and after watching it a while Julian said. "It looks desolate and lonely. Wouldn't you rather watch something more cheerful?"

"So you can tell I need cheering up?" Rob asked.

"I didn't want to pry, but I did wonder why you couldn't sleep," Julian admitted turning sideways to face him. "You made it sound like it happened often."

"From time to time. That's when I need the TV for company," Rob told him.

"Not the internet?" Julian asked.

"TV is kind of traditional. After our mom died, my sister and I used to keep each other company when we couldn't sleep, which was a lot. We would watch TV together or just flip channels. Sometimes we did that straight until morning, not getting a wink of sleep. Back then my sister said that I had forgotten how to sleep, and I guess I never relearned it." Rob remembered how Christie came over to keep him company whenever he was up, and Rob did the same for her.

"I'm sorry about your mom," Julian said.

"Yeah, those were hard days. She took her own life." Rob felt like he had to say it. It was a painful truth he didn't want to hide.

Rob heard Julian gasp softly. "I'm so sorry," he said in a hushed voice.

"She struggled with depression for a long time but especially after she lost her job. She was a music teacher, and she couldn't find any work, so she just kept sinking deeper. The whole time, she was quiet, hiding from us how bad it was. We were her family. We should have seen through her empty smiles." Rob paused then pushed on in a voice raw with emotion. "I was fifteen and my sister was seventeen when it happened. We were at school. My sister had volleyball practice, and I went to watch since she was my ride from school. Dad got home from work first. He found Mom in the bathtub. He was still there kneeling by her side when my sister and I came home. There was no hope. She had been like that since morning."

As the agony of that moment returned to him, Rob just breathed. Julian took his hand, held it tight and put his head on Rob's shoulder. They stayed like that while Rob breathed through the pain that always came back fresh and strong any time he talked about his mom.

Raising his head from Rob's shoulder, Julian asked him, "How did you get through it?"

After a bit, Rob told him, "Sometimes I wonder about that too. Dad was a destroyed. He blamed himself, we all blamed ourselves. My

sister and I were so scared for him. For his sake, we kind of buried our grief. But we had to. We couldn't lose him too. My sister was the one who really held us together. I don't know if I could have made it through those years without her. Lying awake when the house was so quiet, all I could hear was my heartbeat reminding me that I was alive and that Mom wasn't. It was too much. I didn't think I could hang on."

Suddenly Julian was hugging him. Finding himself in his tight embrace with the side of his face pressed against Julian's, Rob was afraid he might start sobbing. So many times he forced himself not to cry about his mother that it became second nature. He didn't want to upset his dad, his sister.

Now he just breathed through it and held onto Julian. "Sometimes it was so hard to push through the wall of grief and keep going, not let it crush me, bury me," he confessed.

"You made it," Julian told him.

They pulled apart slowly but sat close. A heavy silence descended over them, but Julian's presence next to him was comforting and warm.

Rob wanted to thank him for being there and listening to him, when Danny suddenly appeared in the doorway. He was breathing fast with his eyes wide and frightened. For a moment, the little boy stood in the doorway, his face anxious as he just stared.

Julian had been about to get up and got to him, but Danny was faster. He rushed in, saying under his breath, "Julian, you're here." He ran over and wrapped himself around Julian's knees.

"You're safe now," Julian told him and picked him up so he could sit in his lap.

Now Lenny was there too, trying desperately to climb on the sofa and failing. Rob helped him out.

"Lenny wants to sit with us too," Rob said as he snuggled with him.

Calmer now that Julian was holding him in his lap, Danny told them what had upset him. "I couldn't see you or Rob or Lenny."

"Wasn't Lenny right there with you?" Julian wondered and Danny shook his head.

"It was probably a dream," Rob said. He remembered nightmares from the time after his mother died about walking the empty house, not able to find his mom or his dad or his sister. Then Christie would shake him awake, reassuring him that at least she and Dad were still there.

"We were in here watching TV," Julian told Danny. "You want to watch TV with us for a little bit?"

As all of them sat together, Danny was calmer, even kind of happy. They watched a little TV together then Julian told his little brother, "Back to bed with you. I'll sit with you until you fall asleep."

Danny wasn't eager to go, but he cooperated as Julian carried him out and Lenny followed. Leaning his chin on Julian's shoulder, Danny waved to Rob.

"Good night again," Rob told him with a wave.

As long as he could run to Julian, that little guy was OK. Danny knew he was safe and loved. Julian and everything about him were like a cocoon that could keep all the bad things out.

Rob had gotten a little taste of that for himself when he was held in Julian's arms. He found comfort and warmth there and also a feeling of something hot and vibrant coming alive inside him, telling him not to let go.

Chapter 13

Rob started his morning helping Danny get ready and then taking him and Lenny for a walk before breakfast. The whole time, Julian was in the office, on the phone and working on his laptop. He didn't even have time for breakfast.

That's why Rob and Danny made him a little something he could eat at his desk. As Rob went in to take the plate to him, he heard Julian say, "My assistant will send you the details."

When Julian hung up, Rob got ready to deal with whatever needed to be done, but he then heard Julian talking with Ms Dover on the phone and giving her instructions about what she needed to send to the client.

"Ms Dover, umm... Is she still your full time assistant?" Rob asked once he was off the phone.

"Of course," Julian said, not 'for now,' or anything else that might help put Rob's mind at ease. That meant his time here would be over even sooner than he thought.

Noticing his reaction, Julian turned to face him fully. "That doesn't mean I don't need your help here, especially with Danny."

"OK," Rob said, not sure where things stood.

"I didn't think you minded," Julian said.

"I don't. Danny is great. I just didn't realize... Anyway. Danny and I made you this whole-wheat waffle sandwich for breakfast. He's a sandwich-making expert now," Rob said and he forced a smile.

"Thank you," Julian said as he looked at their creation.

His smile seemed genuine so that put Rob in a better mood. "It has apple slices and a little honey inside. We couldn't let you go without breakfast."

"I appreciate it, and thank you for spending time with Danny. Things get a little hectic sometimes," Julian said.

"Sure. I'll go clean up in the kitchen. A few things got kind of sticky," Rob told him.

Just a few words from Julian and Rob was so much happier as he left. Even if he didn't know any more than before about how long this job would last, Rob felt lighter.

At midday, Rico brought Sammy over along with their lunch from the café. They all ate together, and Mitch pointed to the two complimentary pieces of peach pie with whipped cream. "I bet no one ordered those."

Rico confirmed it. "Grandma sneaked them in there."

"That's what Grandma gives to the kids she likes," Sammy said to

Danny. "Grandma was Rico's grandma first, but he let me borrow her. Now she's my grandma too."

"I don't have a grandma, but I have Lenny," Danny told her.

Rob glanced at Julian and saw him frown. It must have bothered him that he couldn't give Danny a bigger family.

"You can borrow my grandma. She's nice," Sammy said generously and Mitch gave his little daughter such a loving smile for that.

All through lunch, Julian was getting a lot of emails and Rob asked, "Are we going to be busy?"

"Seems so," Julian said. He was ready to rush off, but this time he wanted Rob to do some work too.

Mitch and Rico offered for them to let the kids hang out where they could watch them. Since Danny was doing fine, Julian and Rob went off to his office.

"You're still not comfortable letting him play with other kids?" Rob asked once they were away from the others.

"I'm worried something might go wrong."

"If it does, you're right here. But Sammy seems like a nice kid." She was lively and determined, more like Rico than her stolid and serious dad.

"You're right. I shouldn't expect the worst. I should be more positive," Julian said as he sat behind his desk.

"Is that what I said?" Rob asked.

"More or less. Now we better get to work. I'll probably want to check on Danny in a few minutes," Julian admitted with a sheepish grin.

As he helped Julian compile information for a prospectus report, Rob worried that he wasn't up to the task. To Ms Dover, the stuff he found difficult was a breeze. Rob ended up doing only the most basic tasks. At the end Julian still thanked him.

"I wasn't as helpful as I wanted to be," Rob admitted.

"Of course you were. I would be way behind if it wasn't for you. And I would have to work right through dinner," Julian said.

After Julian didn't need him any more, Rob sat on the floor of the library with the kids and read them the *Super Strong Little Bee*. The little bee was the tiniest bee of all the bees. The other bees teased him and he was sad. Then the little bee discovered how strong he was, and he went around lifting fire trucks and refrigerators. Rob read while the kids sat on either side of him so they could see the pictures of the bee lifting things over his head.

"He's really strong," Sammy said to Danny. "That's a good book."

Danny smiled, pleased that she liked it. "Lenny likes it too, but then he tries to eat it."

Sammy sighed at him. "Oh Lenny."

When Rob closed the book, he saw that Julian was leaning in the doorway of his office, smiling at them. Rob's eyes lingered on him, but he wasn't the only one who saw him there. Rico noticed him too.

He elbowed Mitch and whispered, "See that? What did I tell you?"

Both Rob and Julian glared at him, but he only shot them an innocent smile. Whatever he was implying, Rob refused to read anything into the way Julian smiled. That smile was for the kids, not for him.

That evening, right on cue, Danny's super strong bee costume arrived. Hurriedly, Rob stashed it in the closet under the stairs so Julian could surprise him with it on Halloween. He did it just in time as he heard Julian and Danny upstairs.

Rob went up to see if Julian needed anything, but he was already done giving Danny his bath. Ready for bed, Danny was stepping out into the hall. Julian kissed the top of his head then he told him, "Your hair smells nice."

Running over to say goodnight to Rob, Danny told him the news. "My hair smells nice."

He pointed to the top of his head, so Rob kissed his head too. "Sure does," he confirmed.

Going over to Lenny, Danny got down on the floor. "You sniff it, Lenny."

Laughing, Rob picked him up off the floor and hoisted him up and over his shoulder. "Everyone sniffed your hair now. Time for bed."

"I'm up here, Lenny." Danny waved to the little dog, who cocked his head to one side like he was wondering how he got up there.

Rob handed Danny off to a smiling Julian. Working as a team, the two of them put Danny to bed together and once again read to him about the super strong bee.

When Danny had been in bed for a while, Rob decided to go get the costume. It could wait until morning, but he knew Julian was awake too. Always alert for the sound of his footsteps, Rob heard him moving around. He would take the costume to Julian so he could have a look at it, check it over. Or maybe that was just an excuse so Rob could spend some time alone with him in the dead of night.

He didn't see Julian as he went out into the hall, so he went downstairs to get some water first. When he came back from the kitchen, he saw Julian coming down the stairs.

"I was a little restless so I figured I might as well get up and do something useful," Julian said to him.

"So you're going to be working?" Rob asked.

"I promised Danny I would find Lenny's friend, that purple seahorse,

dog toy, so that's what I'm doing," Julian said. "I didn't see it upstairs."

"I think I saw it under your desk," Rob told him.

As they both went toward the office, Rob could tell that Julian was alert for any sounds coming from upstairs. He was ready to rush up there if Danny should need him.

When they reached the office, it was dark and it stayed that way even after Rob flipped the light switch.

"Why is this light out?" Julian asked almost angrily. Rob had noticed that he kept a lot of lights on at night. The lamp on his desk was always on at night, but it was out now, and Julian was suddenly tense and breathing fast.

After going in and checking the lamp, Rob told him, "Looks like the light bulb went out. I'll change it."

"You don't have to do that," Julian said, but he didn't sound very convincing as he forced out the words. Walking stiffly, he came into the room but not very far. He went to lean on the wall by the door.

Something was way off about him.

"It's no problem. I'm up anyway. Are you feeling OK?" Rob asked him.

"Fine," Julian said, but his voice was strained.

"OK. Be right back."

Rob was almost out of the door when he heard Julian speak again, his words coming out in a tight whisper. "Everything is fine."

Rob stopped and turned. "Are you OK?" he asked again.

"Yes. Fine." Julian was only a shadow pressed up against the wall. Was he this rattled because it was dark? Why didn't he go out into the hall then?

"You don't need to stay here," Rob told him.

"Danny likes it here," Julian said.

"What?" After a moment of confusion, Rob realized that he was talking about his reason for staying at the house. "You don't have to stay alone in this room."

"I'm fine," Julian insisted and Rob suddenly felt so sad for him.

"Come and help me find a light bulb." Rob went over and took his hand. For a second Julian resisted then he gave in and let Rob lead him out of the room.

Under the hallway lights, he could see Julian's pale face and haunted eyes. His lips were trembling until he raised his eyes to Rob. "Thanks."

As he led him to the kitchen, Rob kept a hold of his hand. The small light over the sink was on in there, but Rob turned on the big one as well. He made Julian sit at the kitchen table and handed him a bottle of water. Rob considered that he might want something stronger, but he didn't know if there was any liquor in the house.

"Why were you trying to torture yourself by staying in there?" Rob

asked Julian as he sat across from him.

"I wasn't," Julian claimed though it certainly seemed that way to Rob. "It's just that I can't fall apart even in the dark. I need to stay strong."

"You are strong, but what you said... Do you hate being in this house?" Rob asked him.

Julian shook his head. "Not most of the time. I hate the house the way it used to be, the house where my grandfather made the rules."

"If you want to give Danny a quiet place, there are other houses in the country," Rob pointed out.

"But this one is rightfully ours. It's mine and Danny's." Julian groaned, lowered his head into his hands and rubbed his eyes. "I guess I had some idea of reclaiming it as our family home."

Rob found that he approved of his way of thinking. "You're right. Then just remind yourself that it's your house, your rules. And it's Danny's home," Rob told him and reached out across the table to briefly cup his hand.

Julian smiled. "That's a good way to think of it."

He seemed more at ease now, and Rob hated to upset him again. That's why he hesitated before he asked, "What is it about the dark?" Rob didn't want to pry, but he thought he should know.

Julian took a deep breath and nodded like he was agreeing that Rob should hear it. "I had a nanny when I was little, before I started school. She was kind but also quite old and she passed away. I found her sitting outside on a bench, slumped forward, with her phone slipping out of her hand. It was a shock, and once she was gone, I didn't have anyone who could help me through it. My grandfather didn't want me to have another nanny. I started to have nightmares, so I left my lamp on all night. When my grandfather found out I was sleeping with my light on, he was livid."

"Livid?" Rob said, not understanding.

"It was a sign of weakness," Rob said with a bitter smile. "Seeing that I was afraid of the dark made him furious. So to destroy that weakness, he forced me to sleep in the dark. He didn't trust me not to turn the light on. He made sure I didn't have a flashlight and he took the light bulb out of the lamp."

"Damn," Rob said. "Your grandfather was twisted." The thought that anyone could be so cruel to Julian infuriated him.

"Eventually he decided I was cured, and I got to have a light in my room again. But after that I never dared to turn it on in the middle of the night. When I got scared, I would reach under the lampshade and feel for the light bulb to make sure it was there. That was my only comfort."

"Damn. I'm sorry. It must be horrible for you when Danny has a

nightmare," Rob said.

"It's worse for him. He's so small and helpless and scared," Julian said. He got up from the table, but he still looked troubled.

"You were too, but at least Danny has you," Rob reminded him and stood up as well. "He knows he can run to you and you'll make it all better." He had seen that for himself.

"I have to be there for him," Julian said in a hushed voice. Facing the kitchen window, he was staring into the lonely darkness of the countryside at night, and it seemed almost like he was talking to himself. "When there is no one to comfort you, that's when the fear sinks in deep, grows roots."

Rob stood to one side of him, tracing the lines of his profile with his gaze. Losing himself in those beautiful, haunted eyes, he reached out and put his arms around Julian. Rob embraced him gently, letting him pull away if he wanted to. He didn't do that. Julian stayed in his arms and rested against him for a moment, letting Rob feel the beating of his heart. It wasn't long enough for Rob. Julian pulled away before Rob was ready to let him go.

Keeping his eyes down, Julian told him, " Thank you."

"Just returning the hug you gave me." Rob shrugged, but it was a lot more than that to him. He needed to hold Julian, take some of his pain from him. "I wish I had known this sooner. I thought you left all the lights on for Danny's sake," he said as they went out into the hall.

"It's for him too," Julian said.

"I'll make sure every room has more than one light in it," Rob decided but Julian started to object.

"You don't need to..."

"It's not a big deal. It's just a safety measure," he said. He went to the closet under the stairs for a light bulb and saw the costume there. He gave the package to Julian. The sight of it seemed to cheer him up, and he took it upstairs.

Watching him make his way up the stairs, Rob hated to let him go. He didn't want to leave Julian alone or let him out of his sight for a minute. What did he want to do, stand guard over him all night to make sure he never had a nightmare or one bad moment in his life? Yes, that's exactly what Rob wanted.

Chapter 14

Daylight arrived while Julian was looking at his laptop screen, watching numbers scroll by. He stretched and stared for a moment at a pearl gray sky. It was still early, but it was a relief not to see all that blackness outside his windows.

That was one reason Julian never wanted to come back here. The view out of his apartment window was never black. City lights had reassured him, always there, always lighting up the street and the skyline no matter the time, like night never came.

The dark silence of the countryside was always threatening to swallow up this place. But last night wasn't as bad as it could have been because Rob was there.

How long had he longed for a man to hold him just the way Rob had done? Forever?

All his life Julian did his best to keep what he felt to himself and hold himself back from people, but with Rob it all came spilling out. Of course Rob had shared with him as well. He gave him a feeling of closeness Julian had never experienced before.

As morning arrived properly, Julian was working in his room with the door open in case Danny needed him. But he was also listening for Rob. He wasn't the first one up though. Lenny wanted to go outside, so he and Danny showed up at Julian's bedroom door. Julian was ready to take them, but then Rob came out of his room freshly showered and shaved and stunning as always.

"I'll take them. You look busy," Rob said and pointed to the laptop under his arm.

"Thank you," Julian told him and tried not to remember what it felt like to be in his arms.

He wanted to go with them, but he had a videoconference to prepare for. He spent all the hours before lunchtime on that. After the conference was over, he got a follow-up call from Pete Thayer.

Barely pretending to talk business for a few minutes, Pete soon turned things more personal. "So you took that temp along with you to your little country hideaway. I guess you're more into brawn than brains," Thayer said, and Julian wasn't about to reply. He could just keep talking to himself. "You think it's a good idea to reward thuggish behavior? One of these days that might come back to bite you."

What Thayer said started out like he was giving him well-meaning advice, but ended almost like a threat. Julian had never been happier to have put some miles between him and that man. Thayer was the only one who had been thuggish. Rob had simply come to his defense.

Being protective came naturally to a good man like him.

"So you took a boy toy with you so you wouldn't get lonely," Thayer said. "He must be doing a real good job if you're keeping him around and giving him room and board."

Julian ignored that and stuck to business. "I'll contact Denison about my analysis."

To Thayer, even that was an opportunity to insinuate something. "I'm sure you have all sorts of ways to persuade Denison to your way of thinking."

"I'll persuade him with numbers. I have another call I'll need to take," Julian said to him curtly.

"Of course you do." Thayer didn't believe him and Julian didn't care. He didn't owe that man even one more second of his time.

"I'll talk to you later, Pete," Julian told him and hung up. He hadn't ended that conversation soon enough because Rob came into the office and heard him.

"Pete? Don't tell me you had to take a call from Pete Thayer," Rob asked, his brow furrowed.

"I did."

"Did he have business with you or did he call you just to be an asshole?" Rob asked, still frowning deeply.

"To be a asshole," Julian had to admit.

"He better not make a habit of it," Rob said threateningly, his protective instinct on display. "You know I wouldn't have put him through."

Julian didn't blame him. "I don't doubt it," he said with a grin, his mood already improving.

"Did you sleep last night?" Rob eyed him like he already knew the answer. Did that mean Julian looked really bad while Rob looked gorgeous and radiant?

"No, I didn't sleep," Julian confessed, no point pretending otherwise. But there was a silver lining. "I did get a lot of work done."

Rob wasn't impressed with that. "That means you've been working nonstop, and on top of that, you had to deal with Thayer. That does it. You're taking a break. Do you think you can make time to go to Ashbury to shop for Halloween decorations and get some lunch?"

Julian thought about it and realized he didn't want to miss out, so he said, "OK. Let's do it."

As they went to get Danny, they stopped to talk to Rico and Mitch in the hallway. They were working on refinishing the woodwork on the stairway.

"What are you guys bringing to the potluck?" Mitch asked. There had been a lot of texting back and forth about that.

"Sam said hors d'oeuvres would be fine. I'll have a few things delivered," Julian told him.

"Delivered? That's not how a potluck works," Rico objected.

"I'm always willing to bring chips," Rob told him.

"You're one of those guys," Rico accused him, giving him a look of disgust.

"Yes, I am. I'll go get Danny ready," Rob said.

"It's enough that they're hosting the party, isn't it?" Mitch said.

"True," Rico said and smiled at his fiancé. He became so agreeable as soon as he fell under Mitch's influence. He practically melted for that man.

"We're collecting Danny so we can go Halloween shopping," Julian said as Rob brought him over, and Danny looked so happy at the news.

"What are we doing with Lenny?" Rob wondered.

"We can be your dog-sitters," Mitch volunteered.

When they explained to Danny that Lenny was staying home, he wasn't happy. "Lenny can't go?"

"We'll take good care of him," Mitch said and he got down to pet Lenny and show Danny how well they got along.

"Sammy will help us," Rico said. "We can bring her over here from preschool. She'll like that."

"Is that OK?" Mitch asked Julian.

"You can bring Sammy here any time," Julian told him.

Finding out that Sammy would be coming over reassured Danny that Lenny would be well taken care of. He got ready, and they were off.

In Ashbury, they bought a lot of decorations but nothing too scary. They got lunch at a pizza place to go. Danny and Rob got slices and Julian got a Caesar salad. That earned him a dirty look from Rob as they walked through the shopping plaza.

Sitting on the edge of a big fountain to eat, Danny finished first and then started counting the coins in the fountain. That involved counting to eleven then saying random numbers. Julian made him a paper boat out of the pizza place receipt, and Danny set it to float in the fountain.

Danny was occupied with that, leaving Rob and Julian to sit by themselves. Julian couldn't help thinking that it was almost like a date. But it wasn't. He needed to remember that. The shopping bags at their feet full of crazy decorations should have been enough of a reminder.

This was only OK because it wasn't a date. But now that he thought of it that way, his heart started beating too quickly, his hands became restless like he was dying to touch Rob, his mouth hungry for

forbidden kisses and licks.

"I know we did a lot of running around, but this is restful and relaxing, right?" Rob asked, making him jump guiltily.

No, it was not relaxing to have to hold himself back from what he really wanted to be doing with Rob. But he realized that to Rob, this wasn't exactly the height of excitement. "You mean it's boring?" Julian challenged him.

Rob denied it. "No, I don't. I wanted you to get a chance to recharge since you didn't sleep last night."

"I appreciate that, but I'm all right," Julian said. He didn't want Rob to feel sorry for him or to think he was weak. Still, it wasn't a bad feeling to know that someone wanted to take care of him like this.

"Knowing you were up, I feel bad not keeping you company last night," Rob said.

The last thing Julian wanted was to keep him up too. But hearing the regret in his voice, Julian turned sideways so he could face him. "I know how it seemed last night, like I couldn't handle myself, but I'm OK. Just embarrassed that you saw me like that."

Julian should have been more than a little bit embarrassed. He should have been mortified to have Rob know that he went into a panic just because a light bulb went out. But Rob didn't judge him, just listened and did his best to understand. He really was an incredible guy. That didn't mean that Julian didn't feel bad about it. "It's such a childish fear."

"It's not. I have my own fears that come after me in the dark," Rob said. "That's why I stay up some nights. Remember that if you want company."

"Thanks," Julian said. He was touched but also uneasy at the thought of going to Rob in the middle of the night. As unseemly thoughts came to him about crawling into Rob's bed, he hurriedly looked away.

A woman pushed a stroller past them. All Julian saw of the kid inside was a small hand, but it reminded him of Danny losing his mom, being without family.

Rob noticed his brooding look. "What is it?"

"Just thinking about Danny being in foster care when he should have been with me," Julian said. "He was a complete surprise to me. My father had been gone for two years, my grandfather for even longer. I thought I had no one, and then suddenly to have a little brother."

"I bet Danny was happy when he finally met you," Rob said to him.

"If he was, he didn't show it. He was very withdrawn." Julian could still picture Danny the way he looked when he first saw him. His head down, he was curled up in on himself, arms pulled in, fists closed tight. Then Julian introduced himself. "Hi. I'm Julian. They told you

about me, right. I'm your older brother."

Danny only blinked and wouldn't raise his eyes to him.

"Do you want to come visit me?" Julian asked. Child services had given permission for that while he worked on getting custody. Julian wanted him to know without a doubt that he had a big brother now and that he would be coming to live with him.

Once again, Danny didn't respond. Then he was so scared on the car ride that Julian decided they should stop. On the sidewalk, Danny covered his ears against the noise of the traffic. So that was no good either.

They happened to be in front of a sporting goods store. Julian pointed it out to Danny, took his hand and led him inside.

At first Julian was only aware of that tiny hand trembling in his own. Then he realized they were just standing there while a salesperson asked them if they were looking for anything in particular.

"No. Thank you. We'll just browse," Julian said while Danny cast his eyes down and still held onto his hand.

They wandered the store and Danny found plenty to look at. Then Julian spotted a kid sized, yellow baseball cap and pointed it out to him.

"Is that a nice hat? What do you think?" he asked Danny.

The little boy didn't say anything, but when Julian handed him the cap for a closer look, he held on to it like he didn't want to give it up. Julian would swear that his face brightened.

"Let's buy it, and you can wear it out," Julian said.

At the register, he asked the salesperson to scan it while Danny held it out to her.

"You made a very good choice," she said to him, but Danny wouldn't look up to see her smile.

At the door, he did look at Julian briefly while he put the cap on him. "You look good," Julian told him.

Going outside again, Danny seemed a little braver. He was still scared but not as much as before.

As he sat on the edge of the fountain with Rob and told him about that day, Julian had to admit, "I didn't win him over right away like you did."

"Oh, come on. You're a great big brother," Rob told him while they both watched Danny wave to the tiny paper boat as it sank under the stream of water.

"But I don't know how to lift his spirits the way you do. How to be as open with my feelings and show him how much he means to me." Julian felt like there were walls constantly rising up around him, keeping him from reaching out.

"Maybe you don't always wear your heart on your sleeve, but Danny knows you love him. I could tell he was precious to you from the first moment I saw you two together, and he knows it too," Rob assured him and briefly touched his knuckles to Julian's.

"He's been doing better all the time and especially since we came here," Julian said though his breath caught in his throat for a second at Rob's touch.

"Of course he is. With all the little friends he made and now he has a little dog too," Rob said, smiling. His green eyes were so bright and beautiful in the midday sun while he gazed at Julian steadily.

Julian couldn't believe how much stuff they got for Halloween. They arrived back at the house with the car loaded down with decorations with more of them to be delivered. An ecstatic Lenny greeted them at the door, and Danny was just as overjoyed to see the little dog.

Inside, they found a note from Mitch along with a drawing from Sammy.

Julian read it. "Mitch wrote a message from Sammy. 'Sammy says that Lenny was a very good dog, and this is a drawing of Lenny being a good dog.'"

Julian showed Danny the note and gave him the drawing that didn't look like Lenny or much of anything really, but it was very colorful. Underneath, the words 'good dog' were scrawled very badly.

"I know whose job it's going to be to put up all these decorations, right?" Julian said as he looked at them piled up next to the front door and then at Rob.

"I don't mind. And Danny will be a big help," Rob said and smiled at Danny who was still fussing over Lenny to make up for their long separation.

What would happen when Rob decided to leave? He was so wonderful. Both Danny and Julian were going to miss him terribly.

Chapter 15

When he was little, Julian never got to enjoy Halloween. He figured it was too late now, but Danny's excitement was infectious. The path to the house was lined with jack o'lanterns they planned to light when they left to go trick or treating. That time couldn't come soon enough for Danny. In his costume since lunch, he kept asking, "Is it time yet?"

While Julian was busy with his own work, Rob was taking care of getting the house ready for the Halloween dinner. He was in the living room right now. Up on a ladder, Rob was hanging tiny pumpkin lights over the living room windows. Danny was watching with a happy smile on his face and keeping Lenny out of the way.

Julian had a few things to finish up in the office, but he stopped in the doorway and just watched Rob. Whatever he did, Rob had a way of making Julian want to stare at him like he couldn't get his fill.

"How does it look?" Rob asked, stepping down from the ladder and turning the lights on.

Julian was about to answer, but Rob wasn't asking him. He hadn't even noticed Julian lurking there.

"It's good," Danny chirped and his approval was all that mattered.

"Today is going to be fun, right?" Rob told him.

"Trick or treat!" Danny said standing up in his yellow and black superhero bee costume with its striped cape that matched Lenny's.

"Uh oh. Now I have to give you candy or you'll play a trick on me," Rob said and Danny giggled.

God, watching them together was the sweetest thing. Julian didn't want to tear himself away, but he did want to do his work now and free up his schedule for this evening.

A while later, Julian was in his office when he heard Rico's noisy arrival.

"Look at you, super bee! But where's Danny?" Rico was asking as he went into the library. That's where Rob was hanging some more pumpkin lights.

"It's me, I'm Danny," Danny told him and Julian smiled to himself.

After a moment, Rico was convinced. "It is you! Wow, you must be so strong now. And Lenny is a sidekick bee. I have a surprise. You get to see it later. Wait here with Lenny, OK."

A few seconds later, Rico was coming into Julian's office carrying two big boxes. Rob was right behind him. Eyeing Rico as he set the boxes on his desk, Julian wondered if they held the surprise. "Are those decorations?" he asked.

"You wish," Rico told him enigmatically.

"So what are they?" Julian asked him.

"Don't ask, just run," Rob advised.

"Like I'd let you," Rico said and opened the boxes. Inside them were two costumes. Two truly horrible costumes. As Rico lifted the brown one, Julian saw it was Count Chocula. The other one was a pink monstrosity that Rob identified as Franken Berry.

"Those are not for us," Rob said in a horrified voice though the costumes were clearly adult sized.

"They're mostly for Danny," Rico said then he smiled meanly. "But I plan to enjoy them too. Now suit up."

"You don't really expect us to wear these," Julian said as Rico pushed the Count Chocula costume toward him.

"For Danny, I do." Rico leaned over his desk to stare him down. "I know your weakness."

He wasn't wrong about that. Danny would be thrilled with these costumes, so Julian couldn't say no. But he was planning to let Rob off the hook.

"I'm going to go home and get ready, you put those on," Rico ordered them then he was out the door. Julian could hear him telling Danny to wait and they would be out there soon to show him the surprise.

Well after Rico left, Rob was still glaring after him. "I did say these guys need to make their own fun, but this is going too far."

"You don't have to wear that," Julian told him with a laugh.

Rob frowned at him. "Are you going to wear yours?"

"For Danny," was all Julian said.

"Then I'm doing it too," Rob said decisively. He picked up the pink monstrosity and shuddered.

"You really don't have to," Julian told him.

"You want to be in this alone?" Rob challenged him.

"No," Julian admitted.

Rob smiled at him. "I know it's not a job requirement, but Rico is right. Danny will get a kick out of it."

"Are you sure we won't scare him," Julian asked as he had another look at the costumes.

Rob had to laugh at that. "Not a hundred percent sure."

Julian only had a little more work to do then they got into their ridiculous costumes. When the two of them went in to show off their costumes, Danny was buzzing around the library with Lenny. Catching sight of them, he stopped and gasped then turned to Lenny. "Look," he whispered like he didn't know what to make of what he was seeing and he wanted to consult the dog.

While he huddled with Lenny, Julian approached him cautiously.

"Hi, Danny. It's us," Julian told him, but Danny was still looking at them kind of funny though the headpieces didn't cover their faces all the way. He came over to them tentatively, and Julian asked, "You want to see me?"

When Danny nodded, he took off the Count Chocula head and that made him giggle. Now Danny shifted his gaze over to Rob.

"You want me to do it too?" Rob asked.

There was another giggle when Rob pulled off his Franken Berry head.

"You ready to go trick or treating?" Julian asked and offered Danny his hand.

Arriving in Peach Tree, they found parking on the outskirts of town. As they stepped out of the car and got the little super strong bee and his sidekick out, Danny stopped and pointed at their heads.

"I guess we have to put these back on now," Julian said with a wan smile.

Putting on his pink head with antennae sticking up, Rob turned to Julian with a deadly serious expression on his face. "I'm here for you. Stay strong."

Julian had to laugh. If Rob was right there with him, he knew he could get through this ordeal. So with their silly costumes on, they walked into town armed with candy. They joined the trick or treaters and their parents walking up and down Main Street.

Adults were carrying candy to give out. Kids were carrying bags and buckets for the candy they would be getting. Uneasy in the crowd, Danny held onto their hands tightly as he walked between them and Rob carried Lenny. They made sure to shield Danny from the more gruesome costumes, but at least Main Street was closed to cars.

"Just remember Julian is still under there and so am I," Rob told Danny.

Danny looked up at Julian. "You're under there, Julian?"

"Yes, I am," Julian assured him, though he wished he wasn't. He felt like an idiot in this costume. But the real crime was what Rico did to Rob.

Someone like Rob deserved to be dressed in an outfit that showed off that beautiful body and the way he moved. Not that hideous thing with antennae and an oversized head. Looking at him, Julian knew without a doubt that Rico was a truly evil being.

Danny was starting to get some candy and give some out too. Now he was a happy little guy, feeling more secure walking between them, holding Rob's and Julian's hands and smiling all around.

It didn't take them long to run into a group they knew. Lara and

Noreen were dressed as the Good Witch of the North and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Gloria was dressed as the Little Red Riding Hood. Their costumes looked really good. As they approached, Julian got ready to be a laughing stock and Rob groaned.

"Hang in there," Julian told him.

Right away, Gloria had a verdict. "You look funny." The little redheaded Red Riding Hood clapped and smiled as she said it, so she must have meant it in a good way. She liked Danny's and Lenny's costumes too.

"Lenny's cape turned out really well, thank you," Julian told Lara.

"It was no trouble," she said while shaking her head at what he and Rob looked like.

"You two are a sight," Noreen said to them.

Danny raised his hand and held up four fingers to correct her. He then pointed to the tiny dog in Rob's arms. Julian found himself staring at Rob cuddling Lenny, and wondering how he could still be so attracted to him when he was dressed like that.

While Julian was wondering about his powers of attraction, Rob pointed to Noreen's Dorothy costume. "Where's Toto?"

"He's right there dressed like a bee," Noreen said then she craned her neck and gestured behind them. "Or maybe he ran away to become a pirate."

They all turned to watch the Hayes guys as they came closer. All of them were dressed like pirates, including the dogs. While the dogs only wore scull and crossbones bandanas, everyone else had eye patches, fake sabers, and all the rest. Sam looked good in a loose, white shirt and leather vest with a saber strapped to his narrow hips. Wyatt was the captain, complete with a tri cornered hat and a fake parrot on his shoulder.

"There was some talk of superheroes, but the parrot cinched it," Wyatt explained as they all gaped at him.

"You're not a bad pirate, but you know who would make the perfect pirate?" Rico asked as he sneaked up on them.

"Let me guess. Mitch," Wyatt said with a sigh.

"Yes," Rico said gleefully and hooked his arm through Mitch's. The two of them were dressed as prohibition era gangsters. Mitch was wearing a spiffy, pinstriped suit and a black fedora with a white band. Hanging all over his man, Rico wore a tweed newsboy cap and a collarless shirt with a vest over. They both looked really good and that made Julian and Rob glare at Rico.

While the pirates and gangsters argued about who had the sexier partner, Noreen squinted at Rob and Julian. They were not in the running. "Who did this to you?" she asked. "Neither of you is capable of this level of masochism."

"How do you know?" Rico asked, and she knew right away he was the guilty party.

Rob confronted him and looked him up and down, standing there in his dapper costume. "You cheated. You made us look like..." Rob gritted his teeth and skipped over some expletives. "...like this. And you made yourself look good."

"So you're saying I look good. Come on, keep the compliments coming," Rico taunted him then he called the kids over. "What do you guys think of their costumes?"

The kids all liked their costumes of course.

"Your costumes are good," Sammy said, looking at Rob in particular. That might have been because she was wearing an outlandish pink costume of her own. Julian would swear she had on every pink item of clothing she owned all at the same time. Rico was probably responsible for that too.

After praising their costumes, Sammy turned her eyes on her dad and Rico with a look of disappointment.

"What's with that look? You told us we look nice," Rico reminded her.

"You look nice, but you and Daddy are just wearing clothes," Sammy told them.

"See?" Rico said to Rob. "Do you think our kind of costumes would make Danny smile? You heard Sammy. They're just clothes."

"If you did it for Danny, I guess I can forgive you... some day. Maybe," Rob told him grudgingly. He then wondered about Sammy. "Who are you that you look so cute?"

"I'm a superhero, the Pink Tornado," she said and then she spun around in her frilly dress, pink leggings, striped pink and purple knee-highs, a puffy, pink jacket, and a sparkly silver mask over her eyes. All of it topped with a huge, floppy purple hat with its brim pinned back so she could see.

"This is not her regular Pink Tornado costume. This is amped up Super Pink Tornado," Rico announced and helped Sammy twirl around and around. Then all the kids started spinning around and the adults got ready to catch them before they fell down.

"Just as long as spinning doesn't lead to puking," Sam said.

"Let's go extort some candy," Wyatt said. "Candy ahoy!"

They moved on with the kids in the lead and Rob and Julian close behind them so they could keep an eye on Danny. He was doing well. It was Julian and Rob who trudged along and exchanged looks of commiseration.

Rob was so good to put himself through this. For Julian, it was almost fun to be dressed like this because Rob was right there, suffering alongside him. But Julian still didn't intend to forgive Rico

for doing this.

As the kids walked ahead of them in a jumble of various costumes, Rico pointed out Gloria and Sammy skipping arm in arm. "Look at them. Little Red Riding Hood and the Pink Tornado. It's perfect."

"Sammy's costume looks exactly like Rico and a small child put it together," Noreen said pointedly.

Rico didn't deny his own genius. "Awesome, isn't it?"

"I was gonna make Gloria a Dorothy costume," Lara was saying. "But we came across this bright red velvet fabric, and she fell in love with it. So it was either the Little Red Riding Hood or a Santa outfit. Good thing the Dorothy costume fit Noreen too."

"How you lie," Noreen said.

Julian and Rob looked at each other and then couldn't help smiling. Once again, Julian was amazed that Rob somehow managed to be sexy despite how he was dressed.

Trying not to stare at him, Julian looked around. Among the adults and kids in costumes, Julian had noticed people wearing orange vests with jack o'lantern faces on the back. "What are those vests?" he asked Lara.

"Everyone who came without a costume has to put on one of those," Lara told him.

"That's what I saved you guys from," Rico said, like an orange vest was somehow worse than the costumes he stuck them with.

Rob told him as much. "You didn't save us from anything. I'm a pink Frankenstein."

"Franken Berry. Get it right," Rico said to him.

Julian noticed that the kids had stopped and gathered around Mrs. Del Rio, who had come from the other direction. She was wearing a hoop skirt and a powdered wig and holding a fan.

"Grandma, you look so pretty," Sammy was telling her.

"Thank you, you perfect, sweet angel," Mrs. Del Rio told her and hugged her as well as her dress would allow. She then admired all of the kids' costumes.

"What a happy little bee you are," Mrs. Del Rio said to Danny.

"I'm super strong little bee," Danny told her.

"Are you sure you're not a sweet, little, honey bee?" Mrs. Del Rio asked him with a smile.

"No," Danny said and shook his little bee head so that his antennae bounced.

Leaving the kids so she could greet the rest of them, Mrs. Del Rio did a slow turn to show off her costume. In addition to the rest, she was wearing a white silk scarf around her neck.

"Ask her to show you why she's wearing that scarf," Rico said.

Everyone looked at her questioningly, and she answered by leaning

forward and pulling down the scarf. She revealed an ugly red gash circling her neck. It was well applied and very convincing.

Rico explained it. "Yeah, my sweet grandma is the zombie Marie Antoinette."

"Your doing," Rob guessed.

"Nope. One of her drunk, old lady friends told her about the costume and she ordered it herself," Rico told them. "She was supposed to put on zombie makeup too, but she was too vain."

"It's inspired," Wyatt told her. "Puts my parrot to shame." He petted the fake parrot on his shoulder in consolation.

"Severed head grandma, you got candy for us?" Rico asked her.

"Ssh, the kids will hear," Sam told him.

"Kids don't know what severed means," Rico said then he looked sternly at his grandmother. "Hide your guillotine scar. I don't want you scaring the children."

She scoffed at him but made sure her scarf was in place. "Who did this to you, you poor darlings," she asked Julian and Rob sympathetically.

Every eye turned accusingly to Rico.

"I guess I should have known," she said.

"I did a good thing," Rico claimed. "That reminds me, I need a pic of you two. Arms around each other." As Rico aimed his phone at them, Julian wasn't going to comply, but Rob stepped closer to him and put an arm around his shoulders.

Rico ended up getting a picture of Julian smiling mindlessly just because he had Rob's arm around him. It did feel really good even if he did look like an idiot.

"I never thought Franken Berry and Count Chocula had a thing going, but now I don't know," Lara said and Julian sputtered.

"They still don't have a thing going," Julian told her firmly once he regained his composure, outwardly at least.

Rico leaned on his shoulder and whispered to him, "You need to get on that."

Julian glared at him for the hundredth time that day. He was the last person who should talk. As all this went on, Julian was afraid to meet Rob's eyes. What did he think about talk like that? Was it just a joke to him, or was there any chance he felt something for Julian? The way he looked right now, probably not. Julian just wished he could stop wanting him.

Chapter 16

If there was ever any chance of Julian developing a serious interest in Rob as a man, that probably evaporated today thanks to Rico. Like it wasn't already a long shot for Julian to take him seriously. Still, Rob wished Julian hadn't been so quick to deny that there could be anything going on between them.

He was surprised that Julian actually put on that costume. He might seem stuffy, but that man was willing to do anything for his little brother.

Main Street was still streaming with people, but their group was on the way to the Halloween dinner at Julian's. Driving up the hill, Rob watched the house as it came into view and pointed it out to Danny. With its windows lit up with orange lights as well as the pumpkin lights along the driveway, it actually didn't look all that spooky. It was more like the lights gave it a friendly, welcoming glow. There were goofy scarecrows on the front porch and friendly witches in the foyer.

"We can get out of these now," Julian said as soon as they were through the front doors. "I know you said doing silly things is good for me, but..."

"No. This is going too far. But at least Danny is happy," Rob told him. "He keeps looking up at us and smiling."

Danny had another reason to smile. "I got a lot," he said, amazed with his haul of candy.

"Keep it away from Lenny," Rob warned him.

The others were pulling up in front already, so Julian and Rob went to put out the drinks and appetizers. As they got busy, their costumes stayed on, but not for much longer.

Rob was hoping they would be out of them before the others arrived, but that didn't happen.

"They're here!" Danny announced. He was so happy to see everyone especially the kids and the dogs. "We have more dogs."

Now Rob and Julian were busy again helping set up the food the others brought. They missed their chance to get rid of their costumes.

"Looks good. You guys outdid yourselves," Rob said seeing all the food laid out on the big dining table, though they were eating it buffet style.

It was nothing like the potluck dinners from Rob's college days. There was a lot of real food there including mini corn muffins in different flavors that Noreen made and pork loin sliced and served cold with a lemon mustard sauce.

"It's a feast," Rico said loading up his plate. "And what's this?" He had discovered some kind of dip topped with bacon inside a big, round,

crusty loaf of bread. He dipped a pretzel in it and tasted it before he got an answer.

While he handed out corn muffins to the kids, Sam told him what it was. "It's beer, cheese and bacon dip."

"You are a genius," Rico praised him.

"Wyatt made it," Sam said and gestured toward him among those who had gone to the bar before the buffet table.

"I didn't hear that. I heard cheese. I heard beer. I heard bacon. That was it. Game over." Rico then wheeled on Julian. "Too lowbrow for you, Jules?"

Julian got a pretzel, dipped it and ate it while glaring at Rico.

Watching Julian trying the different foods everyone made, Rob wished he could cook. The kids were too hyper to eat anything they couldn't run around with, but everyone else had plenty.

While everyone was focused on stuffing their faces, Rob saw their chance. First he got an OK from Danny though. With his approval, Rob snagged Julian.

"Let's go," Rob hissed in Julian's ear urgently.

"What?" Julian asked, confused.

"Let's go change before they try to stop us," Rob said and dragged him upstairs.

They made it and Julian couldn't help laughing when they safely reached the top of the stairs.

"Ssh. They'll hear us and then we'll spend all night in these things," Rob was dead serious, but Julian just kept smiling at him.

"You need help getting out of that?" Julian asked then realized what he said. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"It's tempting," Rob told him, but they split up, going off to their own bedrooms to change. They had their own clothes underneath, but they both wanted fresh ones.

After skulking upstairs, they came back down as themselves. "It's a relief to look like a human being again," Julian said.

"It's an improvement," Rob said after checking him out. "You don't make a half bad vampire though."

Rico wasn't happy to see what they had done. "You sneaky..." Rico gritted his teeth and stopped himself from saying the rest. "It's a Halloween party. Costumes are mandatory."

Sam took their side though. "Don't you think you tortured them enough?"

Rico flat out said, "No. They're in big trouble." He then called on the kids to pile on. "Hey kids, look what these guys did. Tell them how much trouble they're in."

"Oh, no," the kids yelled. They were all disappointed, pouting at Rob and Julian, but Danny stuck up for them.

"They're not in trouble. I told them it's OK," Danny said and Julian kissed his cheek to say thank you.

At that point the other kids reluctantly let them off the hook.

"Danny said it was OK?" Julian asked Rob when they went to get drinks.

"Yeah, I asked his permission," Rob told him and Julian smiled at him. "You seem to be in a good mood."

"I'm free of that costume, why wouldn't I be?" Julian said, but Rob was thinking that this was the little boy, who had missed out on so much because his grandfather was an ogre, finally getting to have some silly, childish fun.

"Thanks for hosting this thing," Lara told them when they went over to the bar. She had taken charge of the drinks.

"This place really is perfect for a Halloween party," Rico said while getting two beers and handing one to Mitch.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" Julian asked him.

"Of course it is. I'm all about the horror vibe," Rico said and Mitch nodded knowingly.

"I'm hoping you two will change that," Julian told them.

"Your little bee seems right at home here," Mitch said.

"I hope so," Julian was looking over at Danny with the rest of the kids and smiling.

While Rob was gazing at Julian, admiring his smile, he noticed Rico and Lara giving him significant looks. He needed to watch himself around these guys.

Hearing Julian mention some of his plans for the house, Lara and Noreen wanted a tour. Julian started showing them around, and then the kids and the dogs went along and it turned into a whole procession. Rob stayed behind with the rest of the guys.

"We still need to have you over and let the dogs run around the back yard together," Wyatt said to Rob as he watched the others disappear down the hall.

"Don't include me. I don't know how much longer Julian is going to need me," Rob said. Saying that out loud was really painful, but he had to face reality.

"From what I've seen, Julian relies on you a lot," Mitch told him.

"Not as much as I thought," Rob told them. "His assistant at Upton Investments is handling most of the business stuff. She's a lot better with all that financial stuff than I am. Most of the time, I've been helping with Danny."

"So? That's the most important thing," Rico told him and Mitch agreed with a nod. Then Rico stared at Rob, looked him up and down

and pointed a finger at him. "Dude. You're a manny."

"I am?" Rob said.

"Yup," Rico confirmed like the issue was settled.

"How do you feel about that job description?" Wyatt asked him.

Rob wasn't sure, whether he was an assistant or a manny, or both, the job would still only last until Julian and Danny settled in properly.

Their get-together spilled over from the dining room to the living room. It went on past the kids' bedtimes, but some of them didn't last. Gloria had fallen asleep curled up in Lara's lap. Noreen was reclined next to them swirling a glass of good scotch.

Riley, the most hyper of the kids, was stretched out across Wyatt and Sam's laps, a sleeping little pirate. The other kids were playing cards, three kids vs. three dogs.

"I can't believe Danny is still awake," Julian said.

"He doesn't want the day to end," Rob said and he knew just how the little guy felt. Every day spent with Julian and Danny was like that for him.

Now Rob was noticing what Mitch and Rico were doing. Music played softly and the two of them were slow dancing together, adoring each other. Rob was so jealous he could burst. Blindly he reached out for Julian, took his hand and led him to the center of the room.

"Are we...?" Julian started to ask then the answer became obvious.

Face to face with Julian, Rob inhaled then stepped close and took him in his arms. "We can't let them have all the fun," he said to Julian.

"I don't know how to dance," Julian whispered to him.

With Julian right up against him and his breath heating his skin, Rob didn't grasp what he was saying at first. He then laughed and told him, "You just hang on to me and move to the music. There's nothing to it."

"OK," Julian said. He had natural grace so he had no trouble with it.

"How come you don't know how to dance?" Rob asked though Julian was dancing just fine as far as he was concerned.

"They taught it at my boarding school, but I skipped out," Julian said.

Rob remembered that he went to an all boys school. "You skipped out on boys dancing together?"

"Hardly," Julian said with an ironic look. "They brought over girls from an all girls school."

"No wonder you skipped out," Rob said and they smiled at each other. There were some missteps as they danced, but Rob enjoyed those too. When Julian's steps faltered, it gave Rob an excuse to hold him tighter and bring them closer.

Rob even wondered if he should kiss him. If this job wasn't going to last much longer, why shouldn't he? It wasn't like he needed to safeguard their working relationship. He would be gone any day now.

Just as Rob was making up his mind, Julian looked away from him, and he saw why. Danny had his head down and he looked very unhappy. They went over to him where he was sitting with DJ and Sammy.

"What's the matter?" Julian asked as he crouched in front of him.

"I'm sad," Danny told him simply.

"Why are you sad?" Julian asked and pulled Danny over to lean against him.

"I can't be super strong little bee all the time," Danny said with a pout.

Hearing that it wasn't anything more serious, Julian looked relieved. He kissed the little bee's face. Sammy ran over to Mitch and Rico to be consoled as well. They picked up their fluffy, pink girl and held her between them.

Then DJ spoke up to set them straight. "Halloween is special. It's not like every day."

"My God, DJ is so sensible he puts to shame most of the adults in this room," Noreen said and singled out Lara, Wyatt and Rico in particular.

"DJ is right. Halloween is a special day, but tomorrow is going to be fun too," Rob said to Danny. "Tomorrow, you get to be Danny, and that's pretty cool." Rob held his little hand, and Danny nodded but stayed snuggled up against Julian.

"Who's a sleepy eyed, little bee?" Julian asked. "Let's take you to bed."

"You too, Lenny," Rob said and picked him up.

"It was a fun day, huh?" Julian said as they took them up.

The others were ready to take their kids home and to bed too. Rob helped Danny get ready, and Julian went down to say goodbye to everyone. When Julian got back, Danny was getting into bed and Rob had the *Super Strong Little Bee* in his hand.

"I guess that's what we're reading," Julian said as he went into Danny's room.

"Julian and Rob read it together," Danny said.

They sat down next to Danny's bed and passed the book back and forth. Sometimes their hands touched, sometimes Rob leaned over Julian's shoulder to read.

Rob had just read that super strong little bee had lifted a baobab tree to set it upright. When he looked up, he saw that Danny was asleep.

"I guess I read that to you," he whispered in Julian's ear.

"Lenny is still listening too. You have a good voice," Julian told him as they got up off the floor.

They left Lenny to watch over Danny and stepped out into the hall. For a moment, Rob just lingered there with Julian then he remembered what was waiting for him downstairs.

"There's clean-up to do," he realized.

"I guess that's what happens after a party," Julian said like he had never given one. Off Rob's look, he explained. "I only ever arranged a few business functions, had them catered and had a cleaning crew take care of cleaning up."

"You haven't lived until you have to pick out the empties from the tub and the toilet," Rob told him.

"The toilet?" Julian said and made a face.

Rob laughed and headed downstairs with Julian right behind him. He was surprised that Julian didn't just leave it to him, but he was right there with him sticking dishes in the dishwasher. There wasn't a big mess, but it still took some time.

"I'll have my hands full tomorrow taking down all the decorations," Rob said.

"I appreciate all your hard work. Danny had such a good time," Julian said as he dried his hands.

"You did too," Rob pointed out.

"Yes. I did. But I could have done without those costumes."

Rob shuddered at the memory. "Don't remind me. I'm trying to block that out."

"Rico has pictures," Julian said dashing his hopes of memory-holing the whole ordeal.

Done with clearing up, they ended up going upstairs together. Rob felt kind of funny about that, like they could just keep going and end up in the same bedroom, the same bed.

Of course that wasn't going to happen. But as Rob went into his room, Julian lingered there and said, "Thank you again."

"Sure." Rob almost told him good night, but he stopped himself. He didn't want to send Julian away by saying that. But having him standing just outside his room was unbearable. The moment was tense and unfinished, just waiting for one word from either of them to unravel it.

Hanging out in the doorway of his room, irresistibly gorgeous, Julian looked so young and bright-eyed. How could Rob not kiss him, not pull him into the room and shut the door?

Rob did it slowly. He first leaned in to capture his mouth, sliding from his lips over his furry chin to his neck so he could feel Julian's pulse flutter against his tongue. But the whole time he was so afraid that Julian would push him away, tell him never to do that again.

It didn't happen. There was only moaning and kissing and Julian's hands clutching at him desperately. With an arm around his waist,

Rob pulled him in, getting him out of the way to shut the door. The sound of it closing, like a shot from a starters pistol, sent them deeper into each other's arms, kissing urgently until Rob had Julian laid out flat on the floor.

Climbing on top of him, Rob didn't even take a moment to breathe. All he cared about was his lips on Julian, the taste and the feel of him.

Kissing him wasn't enough, not with Julian's legs hooked around his and his hands clutching fistfuls of his hair. Rob reached into the tight space between them, sliding his hand down over Julian's taut abs. Soon Julian's fly stood open, allowing Rob's hand to push inside.

Panting, dragging his hands down over Rob's back, Julian groped his ass and breathed his name. Julian's hips came up, and his cock was in Rob's hand, hot and hard.

Moaning against his neck, Rob closed his fist around the hardness of Julian's cock. As he pumped slowly, Rob felt Julian urgently pushing into his hand. Rob drew back to watch him. Julian's head was thrown back, his eyes wild with need, his lips swollen, parted, begging him, "Fuck me."

Rob couldn't deny him, couldn't breathe. He just kissed him hard and undid his own fly.

His cock was aching to sink into Julian, but more than anything Rob wanted to make him feel good, make it so he could never forget what they did, never forget him.

Off the floor in a flash, Rob had condoms and lube out if his nightstand drawer and he was back. He now kissed Julian even deeper than before and felt him moan into his mouth and suck on his tongue as his arms locked around his neck.

Julian then dropped back on the floor with a groan and let Rob pull his jeans and boxers to his knees. To help him out, Julian put his feet on his shoulders and pulled his knees to his chest. Folded up and exposed, Julian waited for him, and Rob was so turned on.

His hands shook as he gripped Julian's ass cheek with one hand and fingered him with the other. Once he had Julian lubed and ready, his needy, low moans made Rob forget all about taking it slow. All he wanted was to satisfy Julian right now.

But it wasn't just about him. Rob had to have him, possess him, even if it was for just one night, even if it was for right now that he was sinking into him, that he was inside him.

His need for Julian had been burning through him steadily, but with this beautiful man under him, the need consumed him and made him lose his mind. The only thoughts in his head were "more, deeper, harder."

On the floor, only half undressed, they fucked. Rob didn't know for how long. Then Julian stiffened underneath him and all around him.

His teeth sank into Rob's shoulder and he felt Julian coming.

Julian's name on his lips harsh and broken, Rob was coming too. His voice was guttural, only a growl, but Julian still shut him up with a kiss and they collapsed to the floor together.

The door to his room was standing open. Barely awake, Rob saw it through half closed eyelids. For a second he thought Julian must have left it like that when he went to his own room. But the weight against his chest and hip told him that was wrong.

Julian was right there in his arms. Looking from Julian lying on top of him to the open door, Rob blinked in confusion.

"I opened it," Julian told him while lying on his chest. "In case Danny woke up and got scared."

"And if he found us like this?" Rob asked while at the same time trying to figure out the time. It was some time in the middle of the night.

"We're dressed," Julian said, but Rob was bare-chested. He remembered that he took off the sweatshirt that Julian had come all over when they fucked. Right now he would be cold if Julian wasn't keeping him warm, and he didn't show any signs of wanting to do anything else. Julian seemed contented to lie half on top of him with the door standing open.

Rob was shocked that he was so unconcerned. "So you would tell him we like to take naps on the floor like pre-schoolers?"

"Something like that," Julian said.

Rob chuckled then admitted, "I'm glad you're still here."

"I couldn't make myself leave. At first I just wanted to listen to you breathe and to your heart beating, only for a little bit. But it's not like waiting for a song to end. It went on and on and I couldn't stop listening."

For a few minutes, Rob couldn't think of anything to say so he just rubbed Julian's back. Julian had shocked him again. This other, relaxed and sexy side to him was a revelation to Rob. Then he started to wonder, "Does that mean you didn't sleep?"

"I think I did a little. Your heartbeat is soothing. I never stayed with anyone I fucked before. I didn't want to. They were strangers. Staying here with you just sort of happened, and it made me realize how nice it was." Julian's words were mumbled against the base of Rob's neck.

As he listened to what he was saying, Rob wondered if that was true. Was that the whole reason they were lying together like this, simply because Rob wasn't a complete stranger and nothing more?

It still felt good and Rob didn't want to move from the spot as long as Julian was willing to lie there with him on this hard, uncomfortable floor.

Chapter 17

All morning Rob had been taking down the Halloween decorations, and the whole time he had hardly seen Julian. He didn't even show for lunch. Now Julian was busy in his office, and Rob and Danny were in the library reading and watching Mitch working on the shutters. When Mitch opened a window, the cold draft sent something flying off a shelf. It was the paper plane made from the green paper that Rob had given Danny when they first met. Danny jumped up off the floor and chased after it.

"Better make sure Lenny doesn't get to the green plane first," Rob warned him. Lenny was already showing an interest in it before Danny picked it up.

"He did want to eat it," Danny confirmed then he told Lenny why the plane was special. "Rob gave me the paper, and Julian made the plane for me." He stood on his tiptoes and placed the green plane on the shelf on top of some smaller books.

It was sweet that the paper plane was so important to him, but that just made Rob think about having to leave. He was really dumb to have gotten so attached to Danny and Julian so fast. And last night... He had to stop thinking about that or he would drive himself crazy.

Rico had gone to pick up Sammy from preschool, and he brought her over to the house. She ran into the library with her backpack bouncing.

"Hi, Danny. Hi, Lenny. Hi, Rob," she said as Rico helped her off with her backpack. Then she ran off to hug her dad.

Julian came out of his office, and she greeted him too. "Hi, Danny's big brother," she said.

"You can call him Jules," Rico told her.

"No, but you can call me Julian," he told her.

"Is she babysitting?" Rob asked and Sammy's eyes went wide.

"Yes!" She jumped in place eagerly and shared the news with Danny. "I'm babysitting you."

Danny didn't object. "OK."

Rico pointed an accusing finger at Rob, "You did that. You. There is no stopping her now."

Sammy now turned to Julian and Rob. The look in her blue eyes dared them to challenge her authority. Then she got to it. "I have a letters game with pictures," Sammy said as she opened a box she pulled out of her purple, butterfly book bag along with paper and colored pencils.

"I know letters," Danny said.

"Me too. I'm in preschool," Sammy bragged. "We can teach Lenny too."

"But don't let him eat the letters. I was playing with this, but Lenny tried to eat it." Danny went to the shelf to get the paper plane. He brought it over and showed Sammy his treasure. Danny made it fly and Sammy was impressed. This time Danny was quick to grab it before Lenny could get to it.

"I want to fold an airplane, but I forgot how," Sammy said, looking up at Rico and her dad.

Rico was up to the challenge. "I'm on it. Watch this." As Sammy handed him a piece of paper, Rico rubbed his hands together. He started to fold an incredibly complicated aircraft. He wasn't even halfway through the construction process, and Mitch was already shaking his head.

Finally this marvel of paper engineering was ready for its test flight. Rico pulled his arm back and sent it flying. Inches from takeoff, the plane did a weird loop then nosedive to the floor.

"Hey!" Rico yelled down at it. "You're supposed to be a super plane!"

Rob laughed at him. "Super plane. That thing dropped like a rock."

Sammy had a complaint of her own. "Rico, I want to make an airplane that knows how to fly."

Since Rico had failed them, Danny told her consolingly, "Julian can help us."

Julian showed them how to make a simple plane while Rico groused, "Look at him showing off."

Seeing his pout, Sammy ran over to him and put her arms out. "Don't worry, Rico. I still love you."

"Aww. You're the best," Rico said as he gave her a hug.

"And dad loves you too," she said. "Tell him, Daddy."

As Rico looked over at him expectantly, Mitch confirmed it. "Yes, I still love you." Mitch said it solemnly but in the next second, they we all smiling at each other, so happy.

The whole time, Rob had made sure to keep his eyes off Julian. That wasn't easy. Rob just wanted to go up to him, take him in his arms as proof that last night meant something.

Rob got snacks for the kids and came back to see them making airplanes. In the meantime, Julian had gone back to his office. Staring toward his office door, Rob wondered if he should go over there, see if he was needed. While he was trying to make up his mind, Rico came over to him.

"Why are you hovering over here? We can keep an eye on the kids. Get in there," Rico told him.

"You giving me orders?" Rob asked him.

Of course Rico said, "Yes."

The kids were sending their planes flying all over the library then chasing them down with Lenny's help. They didn't seem to need him at the moment, but that didn't mean he was going to take orders from Rico.

Rico tried again. "Fine. Call it advice, if you want. You were talking about Jules not needing you. Get in there and make sure he can't live without you."

"Why are you pushing me at Julian. I didn't know you were that fond of me," Rob said while eying him questioningly.

"You, pft. You need to stay here for those other two. I'm not dealing with a lonely, heartbroken Jules. I refuse to mop up after you. I have my own man to keep happy," Rico told him and then walked away. Every chance he got he bragged about him and Mitch.

When Rico went off, Rob expected him to go do some work, but instead of going to help his man, he was going into Julian's office. If Rob wasn't avoiding being alone with Julian, he would drag Rico right out of there by the scruff of his neck.

Left to mull over what Rico said, Rob wondered if there was some truth in it. Rob hated to think Julian might end up lonely, but he couldn't push himself on him either.

That morning Rob had woken up alone. Sometimes in the early morning hours, Julian had left. That was a lonely feeling.

After holding him for most of the night, Rob missed his warmth, his arm and leg over him, his beard rubbing against him softly. The blanket Julian had put over him before leaving was no substitute.

That's why he couldn't go and talk to Julian alone. If he did, he might just blurt out, "I need to wake up with you, or I'll never feel right in my own skin again."

He had to stay away from Julian until the urge to say crap like that passed. But was that ever going to happen?

Rob now knew what it felt like to dance with Julian, to fuck him, to sleep with him on the floor, but it wasn't enough. All the time he wanted more.

Chapter 18

As he sat at his desk, Julian could hear the renovations work in the library and the kids talking in their chirpy voices. That was so different from being at his of office at Upton Investments.

If only it wasn't such a struggle to keep his mind on work. Already he had been tempted to call Rob in to help him with something. Did he really need him? Yes, was the immediate answer that popped into his head, but he didn't need his help with work. He just wanted to have him there.

"Be professional," he told himself. He might be at home, but this office was a place of business. The only reason to call Rob in here was to help him with his work. Too bad he didn't need him for that right now.

Julian had never been particularly attracted to anyone he worked with. And all the men he slept with before Rob came along were fleeting, not part of his life in the least, and he didn't want them to be. He didn't ache for them to stay. He didn't mind if he never saw them again.

Rob was so different, so much more real, but he would leave as well. Julian wasn't enough to keep him here. He might give notice at any time, look for something better, move on to a more exciting place with more exciting people, leave Julian behind and forget him.

While Julian was forcing his mind to focus on a set of graphs, Rico barged into his office.

"I was just bitching out Rob," Rico started to say.

Julian cut in. "Rico..."

Rico dismissed the warning in his voice. "Don't worry. I figured out that I was bitching out the wrong guy. That's why I'm here."

"Lucky me," Julian said, leaning back in his chair and giving up on getting any work done. But if he had to neglect work, he would rather have Rob bothering him.

"You are lucky," Rico said. "Not everyone has someone to kick their ass when they're about to make a big mistake."

"What are you talking about?" Julian asked halfheartedly since he didn't really want to know.

"You're letting Rob get away and after I put you in matching costumes for Halloween."

Julian couldn't believe he wanted credit for that. "Just admit you're a sadist. You put Rob in a pink costume with antlers."

"Those were not antlers. You were guaranteed to disappoint that child. That's why I took matters into my own hands," Rico said.

To make it easier to forgive him, once again Julian reminded himself of how Rob said that doing silly things was good for him. Julian had internalized his grandfather's attitude that a Brenner man should never allow himself to look ridiculous. And there he was on Halloween looking ridiculous and not minding that much all because Rob was in the same boat.

"So how long are you going to have the blond hottie working for you?" Rico asked, not that it was any of his business.

Julian didn't know the answer himself. He had guaranteed Rob three months, but Julian didn't expect him to want to stay in Peach Tree that long.

Since Rico was staring at him quizzically, Julian told him the simple truth. "I don't know."

From that Rico concluded, "So indefinitely. OK." When Julian frowned at that, Rico challenged him. "What? Does that sound too much like forever?"

"No one said anything about forever," Julian said a little too sharply. It was wonderful to have Rob here, and it hurt to admit how much he wanted him to stay. "Rob has a job here for as long as he wants. But I don't think he'll want to stay here much longer."

"Well, Rob thinks you're going to get rid of him. He thinks you don't need him," Rico informed him, and Julian wondered if Rob really said that.

"That's crazy."

"Tell him that," Rico urged him while leaning on his desk. "He thinks you'll send him packing any day now."

"I'm not the problem," Julian told him. "Whether I need him or not, do you really see Rob wanting to stay here?"

"Not if you don't tell him you want him to. Don't wait till his stuff is all packed to beg him to stick around," Rico said.

Julian couldn't see himself doing something like that. "This isn't personal."

"You're so clueless," Rico said, getting frustrated. He then changed his approach. "Fine. If you want to keep it all business, then Rob deserves to know how long he'll be employed. Let him know where you stand as employer and employee. Does that work for you?" he said archly.

Thinking about it, Julian had to admit, "That is actually good advice."

"Yeah, no kidding," Rico said indignantly as he stalked out. "And don't be a cold fish about it. Put your heart into it. I mean it."

Rico was gone now, and Julian had to admit that he was right. He needed to speak to Rob, but first he had to take a few minutes. The

feeling that made him hold back was evenly divided between fear and excitement. Both those emotions had gripped him since he started thinking about what came next.

His heart clenched at the thought that Rob would leave and it would be all his fault. But could he make Rob stay? And what waited for Julian if he did? Maybe nothing, maybe everything he wanted or some kind of special torture in-between.

For Julian, last night had happened without any thought or decision, just wanting and needing and letting himself go. But to face what was next sent his emotions into a whirlwind of fear and, God help him, hope.

For now he only needed to worry about Rob's job situation. He had to be fair to him on that front and set aside the rest of it. It's not like he stood any chance of figuring it out anyway.

Rico applied some pressure, and now Julian was calling Rob into his office. As soon as he came in, Julian had to get up and then stop himself from pacing the small space behind his desk. With Rob so near but feeling like miles separated them, Julian was torn in too many directions.

Instead of driving himself crazy, he gave Rob an uneasy smile then launched right into what he wanted to say. "Rico just pointed out to me that you might not know how long you would be working here," Julian said to give credit where it was due.

Rob looked like a man who wasn't expecting to hear good news. "You have Ms Dover, I figured you wouldn't need me for that much longer."

"I do," Julian rushed to say then he continued more evenly. "It's just that I'd rather have you looking after Danny when I get busy. That's more important to me than having you doing paperwork or answering emails for me."

"So you basically need me as a manny," Rob said.

That idea took Julian off guard. "I hadn't thought of it like that, but I guess that's true. Does that mean you wouldn't want that kind of job?" he wondered.

"That's already what I'm doing, and I like it. I like working for you, and Danny is great," Rob said making Julian smile.

"He's making good progress, and you're a really big help. So as long as you can stay on, you have the job," Julian said though he didn't expect that to be for very long.

"OK. That's good to know. I don't mind some job security for a change," Rob said with a smile. He was making it sound like he would be with them for quite a while, but Julian didn't dare get his hopes up.

"I didn't mean to keep you guessing," he said.

"We cleared it up so it's all good," Rob said affably. He seemed more

cheerful than when he came in.

But Julian couldn't help questioning his own motives for hiring Rob and for wanting to keep him here. That's why he decided to focus on the practical. "Your main duties are what you've already been doing. Take care of Danny, make sure he isn't scared. I'd like you to help get him ready for preschool next year."

"He can't wait to go," Rob said.

Julian had seen for himself how eager Danny was to join the other kids. Thinking of the little guy going off to school, Julian added one more item to his duties. "And don't let him grow up too fast."

Rob chuckled. "You're living up to your reputation as an overprotective, older brother. But you'll still need me in the office, right?"

"I will. Plus I'll need you to go through the library shelves to make room for more books for Danny. My grandfather's office also needs to be cleared, while making sure no important documents are lost. I've decided to remodel it."

"OK. I guess you'll be keeping me busy." Rob sounded glad to hear it.

"I'll have work for you for as long as you're willing to stay here and put up with small town life," Julian told him.

"It's been pretty easy to put up with so far," Rob said, but Julian wondered how long that would last.

"You don't mind living out here where there isn't much to do?" Julian prompted him.

"We've done plenty," Rob said offhandedly, and Julian froze. Did he mean...?

As Julian was on the verge of bringing up last night, they heard the kids yelling, "No, Lenny. No!"

"I better go be a good manny and see what that's all about," Rob said and he was gone.

Julian dropped into his chair and let out a long sigh. Being alone with Rob was unsettling, but Julian felt no relief now that he was gone. Julian wanted to look for any excuse to call him back. He felt such a crazy need for Rob.

Every moment spent with him showed Julian how good it could be. But the fear inside him told him that he already needed Rob too much.

Julian could feel the force of the turmoil Rob stirred up in him, the unbearable weight of it, but he refused to give it another name. He was still Julian Brenner. He fucked and forgot. He didn't fall in love.

Chapter 19

After rescuing a book that Lenny found delicious for some reason, Rob looked over the shelves to get an idea of what could go. He ended up over by the window where Mitch and Rico were just finishing up.

"Julian told me you stuck your nose in my business. Thanks. Don't make a habit of it," Rob told Rico, not that he expected him to listen.

"I took a break from home improvement to do some Jules improvement," Rico said, accepting the thanks and totally ignoring the warning.

"Julian doesn't need improving," Rob informed him with too much feeling and realized too late that he should have kept his mouth shut.

Rico nodded smugly. "I see your deer in headlights look. You know you said too much."

"You're just hearing things," Rob told him.

"It's sweet. You might just win my approval to be Julian's boyfriend," Rico said.

"Did you just...? Never mind." There was too much wrong with what Rico was saying. Rob decided to just leave it alone.

Mitch approved. "It is best not to follow Enrico down the rabbit hole."

"Hey," Rico objected, but Mitch fixed that easily with just a peck on the cheek and a few words.

"You know I love you."

"Aha," Rico said. He tried to pout but Mitch had disarmed him completely. No one else might be able to get through to him, but Rico ended up gazing at Mitch like the man owned him body and soul.

When Mitch, Rico and Sammy had all gone home for the day, and it was time to walk Lenny again, Rob hoped Julian could come with them. He got snagged by some issue with a client, so it was just Rob and Danny and the dog.

The light was already taking on the deeper colors of the evening and the air was cold. They took the hill path down and spotted Wyatt and the boys with their two dogs.

The kids were all excited to see each other and the dogs were barking and sniffing each other. Letting the noise die down, Rob and Wyatt stood back.

"We're going toward town. Sam will be leaving work soon and we're meeting him," Wyatt said as they all moved on together along the road into town.

Out in front, the dogs and the kids walked in a big cluster, and Rob and Wyatt followed behind them. Both of them were smiling at the

sight of three boys walking three dogs.

Rob told Wyatt about his job situation. "Rico butted in, and I ended up with a job as the manny."

"Don't blame Rico. You wouldn't have taken the job if you didn't want it," Wyatt said with a chuckle. "I'm glad you'll be sticking around."

"Maybe Rico did a good thing this once," Rob told him. "But I still want to put him in a headlock half the time."

Wyatt raised an eyebrow at him. "Only half the time? You must like him."

"Nah. The other half of the time, I want to do much worse."

"He isn't so bad. He just likes to get a rise out of people. And you're just jealous," Wyatt accused him.

"What are you saying? Do I have reason to be?" Rob asked, getting a little heated.

His fierce attitude only made Wyatt laugh at him again. "Ease off. Not that kind of jealous. But don't you wish you could be free and easy with Julian like Rico is, instead of being formal?"

"We're hardly formal," Rob said, but there was some truth in that.

"You do keep each other at arm's length, don't you? Aren't you worried you'll get stuck being just boss and employee?" Wyatt asked him.

"Julian might not want anything more, especially right now when Danny still needs him so much," Rob said.

"Isn't that just an excuse?" Wyatt asked just as an old truck rattled past them and Danny froze and hunched forward.

In a split second, Rob had his arm around him, telling him. "It's gone already. See it?"

Danny had his head down, hiding under his yellow cap. Cautiously he lifted his head up and watched the old truck disappear down the road. Lenny was climbing up to lean on Danny with his front paws.

"I'm OK, Lenny," Danny whispered to the little dog, but his voice sounded kind of shaky so Rob stayed with his arm around him.

The Hayes boys were looking on with concern, then DJ told Danny. "That was Mr. Miller's truck."

"It scared me," Danny admitted.

"It scared Brownie too," Riley said and pointed to the little brown dog sticking close by his side.

Hearing that, Danny said, "You too. Brownie?" Then he got down to give the little brown dog a consoling hug.

On the way back to the house, Rob held Danny's hand the whole way though he seemed OK now. As they neared the front steps, Danny looked up and told him, "Rob, I don't want to be scared of cars any

more."

"You're not as scared as you used to be. Soon you won't be scared at all," Rob told him and Danny nodded.

Danny was in bed when Rob finally texted Christie so he could update her about his job. He beat about the bush a little, and she jumped in to ask him when he was coming back.

Once he made her slow down and gave her the news, she had a warning for him. "Just don't make the same mistake you made with Craig and start hooking up with your boss."

"Come on, Christie," Rob texted her instead of admitting that she hit the nail right on the head. Except with Julian, it wasn't just hooking up. It was a lot worse.

"Aha. Just be smart, OK?" Christie told him.

Too late for that. All evening and into the night, Rob had been restless. Hanging out in his room, he couldn't stop remembering last night, wondering if there would be more like it.

Finally he got out of bed and left his room. Right away, he saw that Julian's bedroom door was standing open and he wasn't in there or anywhere upstairs. Going down the stairway, Rob stopped in mid step. That sound. It was the piano, the keys being pressed lightly, barely drawing a note.

Hearing it, Rob had to close his eyes. The sound of a piano being played echoed in his heart so strongly, so painfully, he could hardly breathe. How many times had he heard his mom play or just finger the keys idly? He didn't know, but the sound of it was etched inside him so deeply, he kept hearing it even after she was gone and her piano too.

This time, it wasn't a sound he imagined through a haze of grief. Following the sound of the piano playing, Rob found Julian in the living room, sitting at the grand piano, letting the uncertain melody fade away under his fingers.

He seemed lost in thought and so alluring in the dim light, but Rob didn't go to him. He wasn't sure if he was hanging back because he didn't want to disturb Julian or because he felt too attracted to him to trust himself to go any closer. There was still the echo of his mother's piano playing too. Rob waited for the jumble of feelings to unknot inside him, but then Julian noticed him.

"I was looking for you," Rob told him as he came forward. He decided to talk about Danny until he got a better handle on himself. "I was wondering if I could take Danny on some short rides to get him used to being in the car. Start by just sitting in the car then drive him down to the gate, that kind of thing. What do you say?"

"I like the idea, but I want to check with Dr. Vallarta." Julian didn't want to wait for Danny's next appointment though. "I'll call her tomorrow and see what she says. Thank you for thinking of this," he said to Rob with a smile.

No longer able to resist going closer, Rob took a seat next to him on the piano bench. As Julian went back to running his long fingers over the keys, Rob breathed through everything he felt right then. The temptation of being so near Julian in the darkness was so strong it made him lightheaded while the sound of the piano tugged at the pain in his heart and called out memories of his mom.

"Can you play?" Rob asked. He wasn't sure from what little he heard.

"Not really. My boarding school had music classes. I learned a little piano, a little violin. Wasn't particularly good at either. When I was home, I wasn't allowed to touch the piano. I was just trying to figure out if I want to keep it. What do you think?" Julian said, his voice low.

"I..." Rob shook his head. His mind was still too confused by grief and memories and being close to Julian. He couldn't answer. "Sorry. We had an upright piano in the dining room. Hearing you play reminds me..."

"Sorry. I..." Julian said and moved to close the fallboard.

"No. The memories of my mom at the piano are good ones. When she stopped playing..." When Rob didn't finish, Julian found his hand gripping the edge of the piano bench. He covered it with his own until Rob let go and turned his hand over so their fingers could entwine.

Comforted by his touch, Rob started talking again, his voice only loud enough for Julian to hear as he sat close to him. "Hardly any schools have music classes any more, you know. After my mom lost her job as a music teacher, she taught students at home for a while, but she didn't have many. In our part of town there wasn't much demand for piano lessons. One day I came home from school and saw them loading the piano into the back of van. My mom had donated it to a nursing home. Seeing it go gave me such a low feeling. I can only imagine how my mom must have felt, giving away a part of herself. And I didn't even know then how bad an omen it was. It meant my mom had given up, lost all hope."

"I'm sorry," Julian said, gripped his hand tighter and leaned his head on Rob's shoulder.

Rob pushed himself to think further back, to the days before the piano was gone. "She used to play this piano version of 'What a Difference a Day Makes'. She didn't sing it, but I swear I could hear the words of the song being formed when her fingers hit the keys. It was so beautiful." Rob closed his eyes, caught somewhere between smiling and crying. "But when I was little, I loved anything fast and I was amazed at how her fingers danced across the keys. She taught me

how to call for an encore instead of saying, 'Again, again, do it again.' And Christie and I used to say prestissimo instead of hurry up. Mom got a kick out of that."

Now Rob got such a terrible, tearing pain in his chest as he thought about her smile. He hunched forward over the piano and felt Julian's arms go around his back.

"She was so patient and loving with us, and then she did such a cruel thing." Now Rob couldn't help crying. "She stole herself from us. Made herself a ghost. But as soon as I think that, I start to ask why didn't we stop her? She didn't turn into a ghost in one day, she was fading all the time." Rob took a shuddering breath. "On the day she took her own life, Mom told me, 'I love you, Robbie.' She hadn't called me that since I was little. I didn't tell her I loved her. I just said, 'You too', like a total dick." Rob sobbed the words angrily and then gulped back tears and rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes.

"You weren't a dick just a teenaged boy," Julian told him and smoothed his hands over Rob's hair. "Your mom knew you loved her. She just wanted to make sure you knew she loved you despite what she did."

Rob breathed hard while grief wracked him. "I never knew that someone could say goodbye forever like that, 'Have a good day. I love you, Robbie.'

It pulled the ground out from under my feet. I was blind to her pain, and I wasn't loving enough. I wasn't a good kid."

"I'm sure you were," Julian insisted even though he didn't know him then, so Rob told him what he was like.

"I used to give Mom trouble, and my dad too. I got into fights a lot. Not that I always had a choice. I came out in high school and some guys thought that meant they could mess with me. Seeing me come home with bruises or with a busted lip couldn't have helped my mom's state of mind. And then I started taking on the bullies even when they weren't coming after me. First I'd warn them then I'd punch them out."

"Then you would get suspended," Julian guessed.

"Sometimes. If we were on school property. But I couldn't just stand by. When those assholes started picking on someone, I'd just get so pissed off." Rob remembered the white hot anger and how it got smothered by grief and guilt. He would have been an angel if he had known. He would have never raised his hand against anyone if it would have saved her.

She was so gentle. The only act of violence she committed was against herself with the same hands that could draw the softest sounds from the keys, notes you had to hold your breath to hear.

Rob touched the keys and his hand shook so he drew it back.

"Did your mom teach you to play?" Julian asked, his voice low and

soothing, guiding him back from terrible memories.

"I learned the basics, but I had no talent or patience," Rob told him. "Mom didn't push us. She wanted us to find our own passion, that's how she put it. Except I never did. I went to college because it seemed like I should, but I stopped wanting anything. I stopped planning, like her suicide killed something inside me too. All I could do was to keep going, not think too much, not feel too much."

"Rob," Julian whispered and pulled him into a hug.

With his arms around him, Rob let out a strangled cry and buried his face in Julian's shoulder and held him tighter than he should have.

"I would take all your pain if I could," Julian said.

"I wouldn't let you," Rob murmured into the crook of his neck. Being surrounded by the warmth and the strength of his body was enough for now.

Chapter 20

That morning Julian got to do his work in relative quiet. Mitch and Rico were at another job, and Rob was keeping Danny busy. The peace and quiet didn't last long. When his phone rang, Julian groaned as he saw that Thayer was calling him. Julian couldn't wait for Mr. Upton to return and take charge again so he wouldn't have to take all of Thayer's calls.

Once again Thayer found every excuse to mention Rob while at the same time claiming that Julian's work wasn't up to par. Julian ignored his insinuations and stuck to business, but Thayer always came back to the same subject.

"I'm not surprised your work is suffering. It's like you're on vacation with you 'personal' assistant attending to your every need." Thayer chuckled.

"The Brooks Fund is showing some renewed strength, but it's too soon to rely on it," Julian said.

"That doesn't sound like a denial. It must be nice having that muscle-head at your beck and call," Thayer said. "It's obscene what some guys will do for money."

"Yes, it is," Julian snapped, but he was thinking of Thayer and his marriage to Upton's niece. "I have to go now." As he hung up, Julian heard Thayer laugh. Of course he did. He just managed to get to Julian. With the way he talked about Rob, Julian was bound to crack. Rob was his weakness.

That's why Julian couldn't claim innocence where Rob was concerned, but hell if he was going to let someone like Thayer make him feel bad about it. Even after knowing Rob for only a short time, Julian felt closer to him than anyone he had ever known. He trusted Rob, and last night, Julian listened to him share his grief. Someone like Thayer would never understand that kind of connection.

By lunchtime, Julian was ready to escape the office. Going outside, he found Rob in the back of the house, soaking up the autumn sunshine and watching Danny and Lenny playing. It was a spot by the corner of the house that overlooked the orchard.

"Look at you taking a break without me having to drag you away from your desk," Rob praised him with a smile.

Julian admitted why. "I had to speak to Thayer. Now I think we should go out to lunch."

"Or we could take Danny and Lenny out for a picnic. It's a nice day for it," Rob said and pointed at the sun shining down on the golden colors of the countryside.

"Picnic?" Julian hadn't figured on anything like that.

"Get takeout, drive around until we find a good spot to spread out a picnic blanket and eat. You need a proper antidote to Thayer. What do you say?" Rob asked.

It was unexpected, but Julian decided to go for it. "Let's do it." He didn't want to miss this chance for them all to spend time together, and the beaming smile it put on Rob's face made it more than worth it.

"The ground is bound to be cold, so we should get extra blankets and take along some dog food for Lenny. I'll get together what we need," Rob said and he was gone inside leaving Julian to give Danny the good news.

By the time Julian and Danny were ready to go, Rob had the supplies in the car. Danny still didn't love to go on a drive, but he was excited about the picnic so that made up for it.

First, they stopped in town to get some food. In front of Peach Tree Café, they got out and saw Mr. Jasper sitting on one of the two benches by the front doors.

"It's Mr. Fisherman!" Danny called out. "Can I show him Lenny?"

"I think Mr. Jasper can already see him, but yes, you can show him Lenny," Julian told him.

Mr. Jasper was already smiling at the little dog. While Rob and Danny introduced Lenny and passed the time with Mr. Jasper, Julian went inside to order their lunch.

He was going to approach the counter, but Mrs. Del Rio waylaid him. "It's so nice to see you in here. You should stop in more. What? Those sweet boys are not coming in?" she asked seeing Rob and Danny outside though Lenny wasn't visible being down somewhere around Mr. Jasper's feet.

"Not today. We have Lenny with us and we're taking him on a picnic," Julian told her.

"You sure are good to that little doggie and to the rest of them too," she said, but she put on a sly smile as she eyed Rob in particular.

Julian made sure not to follow her gaze, but she could probably guess that he couldn't help but be attracted to someone like Rob.

"We'll get some takeout," Julian said and Mrs. Del Rio motioned for Hannah to come and take his order.

As he went out to wait for Hannah to bring out their takeout, he heard Rob asking Mr. Jasper for a recommendation. "Is there a good place for a picnic around here?"

Mr. Jasper looked at Danny and Lenny then he said, "There's a special place upriver from here. It's called the Little Waterfall. Like the name tells you, it's not very big or impressive, but it is a nice spot for

a picnic."

Julian had Mr. Jasper look at a map on his phone, and he showed them where it was. The drive would be longer than Julian had planned for. As he frowned at his phone, Rob knew that he was worried about how Danny would handle the drive.

"Danny has Lenny to keep him company, and we can stop any time we need to," Rob told him, and he agreed.

It didn't take long for their order to be ready. Hannah brought it out. Greeting them all, she asked Julian and Rob, "You gonna be here for the turkey parade?"

"I thought it was the Fall Harvest Festival," Julian said.

"It's held on turkey day, so it's all the same whatever you call it. You guys gonna volunteer or slack off and sponge off the work of others?" she asked.

Julian didn't like either choice. "I'll see what I can do." He didn't answer for Rob, but it was nice to think that he would be around for that and they could go together to the festival.

"Are we going to a fun place?" Danny asked once they were on the road.

Since it was a longer drive, Rob was in the back with him and Lenny. "We're going to a waterfall that's little, like you two guys," Rob told Danny.

That was the idea anyway, but even when they arrived at the turnoff, they saw no sign of the place where they were going. They drove down a dirt path under canopies shimmering with yellowed leaves. Julian knew to head for an outcropping of rock, but he could only glimpse it through the trees.

When the dirt road ended, it was time to go the rest of the way on foot.

"Are we lost?" Danny asked as they walked among the trees and dry leaves shushed under their feet.

"Lenny isn't lost," Rob pointed out. "Look at him sniffing all around."

"You know where you goin', Lenny?" Danny asked him, but the little doggie only snuffled and strained to go forward and explore all the forest smells.

There wasn't much to the waterfall. The water came down from an outcropping of dark gray rock. It was only as much water as would come from a faucet but plenty to fill up a pool underneath it, and it made for a pretty sight. The iron gray stone surrounded the blue-green pool while rust colored leaves undulated on its surface.

"It's not big but it is a nice place," Rob said as he took some pictures

of it.

Julian was dying to take pictures of Rob, standing there and looking even more beautiful than the backdrop of the waterfall and the rocky hillside behind it. As he took pictures of Danny and Lenny, Julian only got Rob in one shot, mostly by accident.

Danny had a different perspective on the Little Waterfall. "It's not little," he said, looking up at it.

Rob chuckled. "I bet it's the biggest waterfall he's ever seen, so it's not little to him."

Lenny liked it too. Drinking from the pool eagerly, he then shook himself out and went back to sniffing everything in sight. Danny held the leash and didn't mind following him around wherever he wanted to go.

"Only as far as those two rocks, OK?" Julian warned him, pointing out a pair of rocks that stuck out of the ground. He sighed as he turned to Rob. "I swear Lenny has sniffed every tree and every single leaf on the way here."

"That's why he's digging under now." Rob nodded toward Lenny poking his head under the carpet of dry leaves.

"Let's just hope he doesn't find anything interesting," Julian said.

"I'm pretty sure dogs never find anything good," Rob said to Julian and then grinned at his worried expression.

The blanket was spread out on a small, sun drenched clearing, and their sandwiches were served. Julian got roasted vegetables with balsamic for himself and a maple glazed bacon sandwich for Rob.

"You can order for me any time," Rob told him after having a bite.

It wasn't easy to get Danny to sit still for long. Hardly done eating his simple chicken sandwich, he wanted to follow Lenny and see what he might find. That left the picnic blankets for just Rob and Julian to share. With Danny chasing after Lenny, the two of them might as well have been having a picnic alone.

Julian did his best not to think that way. He needed to remind himself that Rob was probably bored. But looking at him, Julian noticed that he smiled as he stretched out, his long legs sticking out off the blanket. Resting on his elbows, Rob stared up at the clear, autumn sky above them while the sun shone down on him.

He was so gorgeous that Julian thought his heart might stop. That was probably as good a warning as any to not stare at him. To keep his eyes off him, Julian took in their picnic spot.

He couldn't believe how pretty it was here with the fallen leaves in brown, red and every shade of gold, and the green-blue water of the pool. But his eyes always returned to Rob. He felt so lucky to be there with him. Leaning back on the blanket, the two of them were

surrounded by the rich colors of autumn and the sound of water cascading softly. It was like a dream.

"Do you want to talk about your call with Thayer?" Rob asked, breaking him out of the dream.

Julian groaned. He didn't really want to rehash that unpleasantness. "Let's just say that I'm glad to be far away from him," Julian told him, but even the little he said made Rob grit his teeth.

"Kills me that you have to put up with that asshole as your boss," Rob said.

"It's temporary, only until Mr. Upton returns. I spoke with him too. He should be taking the reins again soon," Julian said.

"And you'll let him know what kind of boss Thayer has been, right?" Rob said in that challenging way he had.

"I will, believe me," Julian assured him. "That man doesn't belong in charge of anything. If I had known he would become my boss, I would have never gone to work at Upton Investments."

"Did you know him before?" Rob asked.

"Not him, but his younger brother was at boarding school with me. He was one of my biggest tormentors," Julian told him.

"Great. Asshole genes run in the family," Rob said like he was ready to pummel both Thayer brothers if he only got the chance.

"His brother must have told him that I make a good target." The first thing Pete Thayer said to him when they were introduced was that Julian and his brother went to school together. Then he smirked knowingly. "Thayer zeroed in on me as soon as I started at Upton Investments. He kept it low key while Mr. Upton was around, but since then, he has become more reckless."

"That has to bring up bad memories. How bad did it get when you were bullied at school?" Rob asked, his tone grave.

Julian didn't like talking about that, but he couldn't refuse Rob when he had that serious look in his eyes. "My things were always disappearing then reappearing with obscene things written or drawn on them. One day some of the guys led by Alex Thayer barged in on me when I was taking a shower and took pictures and video, said they would put them online. They didn't as far as I know. Another time they pushed me down the stairs, and I sprained my ankle."

"They had to get into serious trouble for that," Rob said.

Julian shook his head. "They claimed it was an accident."

Rob glowered into the distance then brightened when his eyes fell on Danny trying to get Lenny to look at a big leaf. Turning to Julian with a sigh, Rob shook his head. "That should all be in the past. You found your little brother. You should be happy. But to have to put up with Thayer at work after being bullied at school by his brother of all

people. Damn, it pisses me off."

"I lived through it. I'll live through Thayer as my boss as well." Julian was trying to be reassuring, but he found himself frowning. He then saw Rob watching him intently, questioningly, so he confessed what was on his mind. "I hate to think that what happened at school had any effect on me, but between that and my grandfather, I became so closed off. If it wasn't for Danny coming into my life, I might have lived the rest of my life inside my protective shell. I hate that I did that to myself. It was like I let them win."

"No. We all have things that hold us back – losing people then not believing in finding happiness or anything that lasts," Rob said, making a confession of his own. He dropped back on the blanket with his arms folded under his head. While Julian gazed at him, Rob's gaze was lost in the copper treetops right above them.

"Because of your mother?" Julian asked tentatively.

"That's a big part of it. But when I take stock of my crappy relationships, I know I didn't make good choices. My last boyfriend cheated on me with my best friend. I ended up losing both of them, and a lot of trust in people. Kind of lost my temper too. I found them together after kicking down the door. Then I put my fist through a wall twice instead of their lying faces. If the wall wasn't lousy, I would have a broken hand." Rob shut his eyes and Julian could see how hurt he must have been.

Julian couldn't understand how anyone could cheat on an incredible man like Rob. He didn't deserve to be hurt and betrayed like that. "You know you're a great guy, don't you?" Julian told him, his voice a little shaky with emotion.

Opening his eyes, Rob smiled at him then shook his head like he didn't realize it was only the truth. "Am I? I kind of came to expect that every relationship was going to end badly and leave me feeling like road kill. That's why I decided to stick with random hookups until I hooked up with my 'straight' roommate and got kicked out. The timing was hell." Rob's eyes brightened again and he gave Julian another smile. "That's when you came to my rescue. Your job offer was just the break I needed."

"I'm glad," Julian said, but he didn't like how Rob made it sound like the break might be short-lived and then he would go back to his real life, look for guys to hook up with.

If he did, Julian was sure someone would ignite Rob's passion again. He would fall in love and be happy. Julian knew he wouldn't be so lucky. "At least you had the courage to try. I never even got that far. For me, it was always strictly strangers, strictly anonymous, meant to be forgotten." Julian didn't know why he was telling him this, maybe just to be fair since Rob told him about himself. Now he wondered

what Rob would think of him. It was too late to take back what he said so he tried to explain himself. "It was only a handful of times, usually when I was out of town on business. Typical, right?"

"You're hardly typical," Rob told him with that disarming smile of his. And just like that, he wiped away Julian's embarrassment.

Maybe this was why Julian was always baring his soul to him, so Rob would make him feel OK about everything. While Julian was basking in Rob's alluring smile, Danny ran over saying, "I saw a fishy!"

Rob jumped to his feet. "You know what that means? We have to go fishing." He offered Danny his hand and they went off to find a branch to use as a fishing pole.

In the end, Julian got handed a fishing pole too. Fishing to Danny was just holding a stick over the water and calling out, "Hey fishy, fishy. Come 'ere."

Julian looked over at Rob, who just shrugged.

Once he got bored with that, Danny had a new idea. "Make us a boat, Julian."

"Do we have paper?" Julian said and checked to see if he had anything on him.

Searching their takeout from Peach Tree Café, Rob came out with something. "Here's another receipt," he said and held it up. He also found a menu from the café, so Julian got to work making small boats.

Done with that, he left Danny and Rob to launch the boats. They would need to get back home soon, so he started cleaning up. Julian was folding up their blanket as Rob and Danny fished out the boats from the pool of water.

"So this was a good picnic, right?" Rob asked Danny, and he agreed.

"Yes. We made lots of paper boats, but we didn't catch the fishy."

"You didn't get wet, did you?" Rob asked seeing him wave his hand around.

"Just my hand," Danny said.

As Danny held out his hand, Rob checked it out. "And your sleeve a little. Let's roll it up."

Comparing it to his other sleeve, Danny held it out to be rolled up too. The way Rob was with him, so kind and patient, it touched Julian so much. Rob had that rough edge to him, but he was so sweet to Danny. Julian just wanted to stay like this, to hold on to the two of them, to this moment.

As they were heading to the car, Julian told Rob, "I honestly don't know what I would do without you. Thank you for wanting to stay."

"I'm happy to be here," Rob said. "Life out in the country isn't so bad. I haven't gone on picnics or had days like this since my mom died. I've been missing out." He turned to gaze at Julian and gave him a feeling

of hope that was so strong it hurt.

Chapter 21

Yesterday, Rob could have spent all afternoon staring at Julian on a sunny, autumn day. Then last night, he had dreamed about rolling naked in the leaves with Julian. The reality had been a little bit different, and Rob wished he hadn't run his mouth so much about his crappy love life. Julian was great about it though. That's why Rob could be himself around him, and why talking to him felt so good.

But since the night they fucked, the two of them hadn't done anything more than hug. There had to be more. Rob couldn't stand the thought of that night being his only time with Julian.

Right now, Julian was busy in his office while Mitch and Rico were getting ready to start making noise in the big office. Rob was going to take Danny and Lenny on a short drive, but at the moment, Danny was standing in the doorway between the two offices, curiously looking at what Mitch and Rico were doing. They weren't working yet. As Danny looked on, Mitch was putting work gloves on Rico, who was grinning at him.

Seeing how Danny was looking at them, Rico winked at him.

"He's helping you 'cause you don't know how?" Danny said to him.

"I know how," Rico said defensively.

Rob laughed while Julian explained, "Mitch is being extra nice to Rico because he likes him."

Danny seemed to understand that. Judging by the way Rico was beaming at his fiancé, he liked what he said too. Mitch was a little embarrassed, but the look of love in his eyes was unmistakable.

"He's always extra nice to me," Rico said.

"He likes you a lot," Danny said.

Mitch confirmed it as he gazed at Rico. "That kid knows what he's talking about."

Inwardly Rob grumbled. Yeah, he was jealous, dying to do all kinds of big and small things with Julian. Of course Julian trusted him with Danny, and that was a big deal. That should be his focus.

Rob offered Danny his hand. "Let's go practice driving in the car."

Danny took his hand then announced, "I'm not gonna be scared of cars any more. Rob is helping me."

"Listen to him. He's going to be driving in no time," Rico predicted, but Danny corrected him.

"No. I'm gonna sit in the back with Lenny."

"Have fun with Rob," Julian said and gave his little brother a hug.

"Tell Julian to hug Rob too," Rico called out.

Rob went to shut the door between the offices. "That will keep out

the noise," he said, sending Rico one last dirty look through the door.

It was another sunny day, so Rob and Danny took full advantage, spending plenty of time outdoors. They were in and out all day, and that meant Rob didn't get to spend much time with Julian.

It was close to dinnertime when all three of them went into the kitchen to see what they could throw together from leftovers and frozen foods. Lenny followed them in and headed straight for his doggie dish and started munching on his food.

"I guess he's all set for dinner," Rob said.

After watching him for a while, Danny told him. "I'm gonna draw you a picture of a car, Lenny."

He got his drawing supplies and sat at the kitchen table. The drawing was just random lines, but Lenny wasn't going to complain.

Down the hall, Mitch and Rico were getting ready to leave. While Rob and Julian were debating which frozen things to heat up, they heard the front door and then Sam's voice coming closer. It turned out he was talking to Rico. They both came into the kitchen.

On seeing Sam, Danny asked him, "Did you bring us dinner?"

Sam smiled at that. "No. I just came in to say hi."

"I guess we do get takeout a lot," Julian said.

"He didn't bring you food. He came to get me," Rico told them. "Mitch has to go see another client for an estimate. Sam is here to take me to work the dinner shift at the café."

"I can't believe you have two jobs," Rob said to him. He didn't seem like the type.

"And he takes online classes in restaurant management," Sam said and grinned at his friend proudly.

"It's Mitch's influence," Rico said and he looked modest for once.

"I guess you guys are making dinner," Sam said seeing that they had some frozen vegetables out.

"These guys are hopeless in the kitchen. Why do you think Danny asked if you brought dinner?" Rico told him.

"What do you eat?" Sam asked Rob and Julian.

"Take-out or order in. I also know how to spill a bag of salad into a bowl," Julian said then held up a bag of frozen vegetables. "And I can manage these."

"This is Wyatt all over again," Sam said to him. Giving up on Julian, he turned to Rob. "You can cook, right?"

Rob nodded. "I have some cooking skills. I can heat up something from a can, and I can heat up something from a box or a bag."

"Oh God," Sam said and hung his head.

"Look what you did. You traumatized Sam," Rico said and put a comforting arm around him. Then he looked at Danny. "Danny, it's all

up to you."

Danny wasn't paying any attention to them until Rico said his name. "Me?" he said as he looked up from his drawing.

"You'll have to cook," Rico told him.

"I'm a little kid. I can't cook," Danny told him. He was always having to set him straight.

"Speaking of Danny. You can't feed a kid from cans and boxes," Sam told them. "I can teach you some cooking basics and you can go online for the rest."

Rico had some misgivings about that. "Teaching them how to cook? I don't know. Isn't that how you seduced Wyatt?"

"I didn't... Never mind that. All humans should know how to cook," Sam declared passionately while Rico cracked up. Sam stopped trying to defend himself. He set his jaw and threw a challenge at Rico. "Fine. Then you teach them."

"No one needs to teach us. We can figure it out ourselves," Julian told them both.

"You say that now, but you'll end up fishing your severed fingers out of the soup," Rico predicted.

"Hey!" Rob warned him and pointed at Danny, who had gone back to ignoring them in favor of his drawing.

"I keep telling you people, kids don't know what severed means," Rico said and rolled his eyes. He then crouched down next to Danny. "Tell these guys that kids need good things to eat," Rico instructed him.

Turning to them, Danny dutifully repeated, "Kids need good things to eat. And Lenny too." The dog was now lying under the kitchen table, patiently waiting for his drawing.

"Such a sweet kid," Rico praised him and gave him a wink. "I'm counting on you man. Keep these guys out of trouble." He pointed his thumb at Julian and Rob.

Nodding, Danny looked over at them like they really might be troublemakers of some kind.

As soon as Rico and Sam were gone, Julian turned to Rob. "OK. Let's order in."

"After all that?" Rob said.

"I'll call it in from the café and make Rico deliver it," Julian said.

Rob liked that idea, and he also liked the defiant gleam in his dark eyes. Danny wasn't thrilled with the plan though.

"No cooking?" Danny said, disappointed.

Now Julian grumbled, his resolve melting.

"We can heat up something and call it cooking," Rob whispered to Julian.

Julian wasn't happy with that option. He sighed as he looked at Danny, then he caved. "I'll watch a cooking video and see what I can make. You can heat something up if you want," he told Rob.

Now it was Rob's turn to be disappointed. He felt excluded, but plastered on a smile and said, "OK. Good luck."

Rob quickly turned away, but he didn't need to worry. Julian was already looking at his phone. "I need a bigger screen," Julian said and went off.

That left Rob and Danny in the kitchen and neither of them was happy. Rob was thinking that maybe Julian wanted to create some distance between them. Maybe he thought that they shared too much. While his heart beat in a slow, painful rhythm at the thought of Julian pulling away, Danny got his attention. "Rob, is the video just for 'growned-ups' or can I watch too?" he wanted to know.

"I'm sure you can watch," Rob told him.

"OK," Danny said and he climbed down from the chair. Taking Rob's hand, he tried to lead him away. "You watch too, Rob."

"No, but you can watch the cooking video with Julian. Just you two," Rob told him then he noticed Julian standing in the kitchen doorway with his iPad in his hand.

He was looking from Danny to Rob kind of oddly. That made Rob worry that he gave away too much. It's not like he needed to spend every second with them. Rob might like to, but if Julian didn't feel the same, he didn't want to horn in.

"Danny wants to watch the cooking video with you," Rob said to him.

"Maybe he wants to cook with me too," Julian said and smiled down at his little brother.

"You're allowed to cook with a grown-up," Rob told Danny.

"I don't know how," Danny said.

"I don't know how either," Julian told him then he looked over at Rob and held his gaze for a moment. "Rob doesn't know how either. This video is going to show us."

"And Rob can watch?" Danny said.

"If he wants to learn, sure," Julian said then he gave Rob another significant look. "Do you?"

"It might be a good idea, I guess," Rob said. He felt like Julian was challenging him to join them and cutting right through his resolve to not horn in.

Danny was happy, and all three of them ended up sitting at the kitchen table, watching cooking videos. A lot of cooking videos. Danny was in his big brother's lap, and Rob and Julian were shoulder to shoulder while Lenny meandered around their feet.

At the end of each video, Julian would say, "Too difficult." Then they

would watch another cooking video marked "easy" or "for beginners" or "easiest ever", but Julian still wasn't willing to tackle it.

In the meantime, Danny and Rob munched on carrot sticks. "Any more carrot sticks and we'll turn orange," Rob said.

"Oh. I guess we better heat up something after all," Julian decided setting aside the iPad.

"We're going to do cooking now?" Danny asked.

"Kind of," Rob said. Going to the freezer, he got out three boxes of rice with teriyaki chicken. "We can add frozen peas to the rice. That's cooking." They had gotten a whole bunch of frozen vegetables they could microwave right in the bag.

Since Danny didn't know much about cooking, he was cool with that. He looked on eagerly as Julian got out a skillet.

"We need a skillet?" Rob asked.

"We saw them make rice in a skillet in the videos. We can do that too," Julian decided.

Rob didn't see how. They had three frozen bricks of food to deal with. He knocked them against the counter to demonstrate the problem.

As all three of them frowned at the frozen dinners, Julian made another decision. "Microwave then skillet."

"You're just determined to use that skillet," Rob accused him.

"I am. We didn't watch all those videos for nothing," Julian said stubbornly.

It wasn't for nothing though. Danny had fun and Rob did too, or maybe he just liked being close to Julian. For Danny's sake, they made heating up frozen dinners into something like the cooking they saw in the videos. Good thing the little guy was easily impressed.

"He's mixing!" Danny said.

"You can do some mixing too," Rob told him and got another wooden spoon for him. "Just be careful. Do it gently." He held Danny's hand as he stood on a chair and stirred very carefully.

"We cooked it," Danny said when they set the table and sat down to eat.

It didn't turn out too bad, and it made both Danny and Rob feel good. Cooking with them, sitting to eat dinner with them – it filled Rob with so much warmth, but still with an edge of worry when he thought about how much he didn't want to give this up.

At the end of their improvised dinner, Julian checked his phone and frowned.

"You have more work to do?" Rob could see that he did even before he nodded. "I'll clean up."

"Thank you, but I didn't expect you to have to do that by yourself,"

Julian said as Rob stacked their plates.

"Danny will help me, right?" Rob told him as he went to the sink with the stack of plates.

"Yes," Danny agreed as he followed him carrying a single spoon.

Julian went off to his office, and Rob looked for something for Danny to do. He had noticed that the trash was full, so he asked. "You want to help me take out the trash?"

Danny nodded. When Rob tied it off, Danny tried to hug the trash bag so he could lift it.

Rob pulled it back. "We don't want to get too friendly with the trash. Why don't you open the door for me?" Rob told him.

Danny ran and held the door open for him then went along with Rob and held on to the bag. When they came back, they both washed their hands.

"So I guess you're old enough to do chores now," Rob said as he helped Danny dry his hands. "We can tell Julian. He is going to be so proud of you."

Done with the dishes, it was Rob's turn to get busy on the phone and Danny asked him, "Are you working?"

"No, but this is my sister calling me." Rob showed him her picture then he answered. "Want to talk to her? Hey Christie, someone wants to talk to you." Before she could say anything, Rob had her on the phone with Danny.

Rob could hear her saying, "Hi. Hello? This is Christie. Who's this?"

"Hi. I'm Danny," he said shyly then he launched into the most important thing he had to tell her and everybody else. "I have a doggie. His name is Lenny. We 'haved' a picnic. And there was water. Lenny was drinking it."

Rob could hear Christie laughing. "I saw Lenny's picture. He's really cute and so are you."

Now Danny got shy and clammed up. With a helpless look, he turned his eyes to Rob. "What do I do now?"

"You can say, 'Bye, Christie'," Rob told him.

Danny did that then he went to report the news about his epic phone call to Lenny. With the two of them under the kitchen table, Rob stepped to the other side of the kitchen to talk.

"Danny is all talked out now. So why am I getting an actual call when I've been texting you nonstop."

"You know I like to hear your voice," she said. The rest was understood between them. It was so she could make sure that he was really all right and not just putting on an act. When Christie had gone off to college, Rob checked on her the same way. They both did the same thing whenever one of them went away.

"So how are things?"

"So far so good," Rob told her.

"I can see from the pictures of your picnic. Very nice. My boss never takes me on picnics," she said. "Oh. I just remembered what my boss looks like. He doesn't look anything like your boss, so never mind."

"There's more to Julian than just looks," Rob told her.

She gasped then hissed at him, "Don't you dare fall in love with him."

In response to that, there was only silence on Rob's end.

"Oh, Rob," she said with worried resignation in her voice.

"I didn't say anything," he pointed out evenly. He didn't want to admit to anything, but he couldn't deny it either. So he left it at that and promised Christie he'd be careful.

Rob knew too well why Christie was so protective of his heart, and now Julian knew all about his cursed history with guys too. It might make anyone want to take a step back from him. That's why Rob decided to give Julian some space once Danny was in bed.

It didn't work out that way though. Rob was ready to go hang out on his own, but it was Julian who came to the kitchen and kind of hovered.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm really glad you are Danny's manny. He did so much today," Julian said, beaming at him.

"We did do a lot of running around," Rob said.

"That's good. I wouldn't have been able to take him out to enjoy the sunny day, if I even thought of it. As a kid, I didn't spend that much time playing outdoors after my nanny was gone. And I certainly didn't do chores."

"Danny was really into both. You should have seen him try to hoist a full bag of garbage." Rob noticed the skillet on the drying rack and grabbed it to put it away.

"That's evidence that we cooked," Julian said.

"I've made meals where I didn't have to wash anything except a fork," Rob said and shot him a triumphant grin.

"Impressive," Julian said sarcastically.

"I was actually starting to learn to cook a little before my mom died. Then I lost my will for it." As the mood changed, Rob tried to shake it off with a forced smile.

"Anything can bring back memories of your mom," Julian said with understanding.

It was happening more lately though. "The way we lost her cast a big shadow into the future, the past. But it's not as bad as it used to be," Rob said and leaned back against the counter while his gaze traced patterns on the marble floor. "Right after we lost her, I tried to help my dad in the kitchen, but my sister took me aside and told me to leave the cooking to our dad. 'We need to keep him busy. We have to

let him know we need him in little ways and big ways, in every way there is.' That's what she said. And I think it did help him."

"Makes sense. It's proof that you matter to someone, that you have a reason to get up in the morning," Julian said and then noticed Rob frowning at him. "I noticed the difference after I brought Danny home. Being needed brings your life into sharper focus. And it's true for Danny too. He comes to life whenever he gets to help with something."

"Yeah. But how long are you going to be able to impress him by throwing something that's already been warmed up into a skillet?" Rob asked.

"I'll figure out this cooking thing," Julian vowed.

"Sam did offer you some cooking lessons," Rob reminded him.

"No. I'll do it without anyone's help," Julian said.

"Oh," Rob said under his breath and turned to stare out the window. Why did it matter so much to him if Julian liked to pretend to cook with him?

"I didn't mean that I didn't want your help," Julian said to him. "I had a lot of fun."

"OK," Rob said and faced him again with a smile. He was inclined toward Julian now, trying to figure him out, but his dark eyes were luminous and unreadable. The contours of his body under his clothes were so tempting, begging to be explored.

Rob felt a flutter low in his belly then another one in his chest that grew until he couldn't catch his breath. There was no reason for it. But with their eyes locked, a smile started to play on Julian's lips.

To Rob that was just too much. He grabbed Julian and kissed him. Maybe he shouldn't have done it, but it felt so good, like tasting the impossible. He hated to let go even a little, but he had to loosen his hold.

"Sorry, that was too sudden, wasn't it?" Rob was breathless, watching Julian closely again, wondering if he had anything to apologize for. "I guess I got carried away."

"You did?" Julian said as he swayed in his arms. "I thought that was me." He then gazed at Rob. His hands trailed up and down Rob's sides, slow and seductive.

Still Rob held back, looking for a stronger signal. Then it came in Julian's low whisper. "We can do that again," he said looking kind of dazed, pretty much the way Rob felt, like someone half in a dream, refusing to wake up.

"As many times as you want," Rob told him, filling every word with heat and need.

With a kiss, Rob pressed Julian against the kitchen counter then tugged him closer so he could grope him. God, he felt so good. Rob

wanted to devour him. But when he tried to pull Julian to the floor with him, he stopped him firmly and Rob was hit with a wave of excruciating disappointment.

"Not the floor this time. My bed," Julian said huskily then nuzzled his ear, tickling Rob with his beard.

The relief that washed over Rob was almost as sharply painful as his disappointment had been. He cupped Julian's face, that beard of his soft against the palm of Rob's hand, his jaw line sharp. Taking a moment for a deep kiss first, Rob took his hand and pulled him out of there and up the stairs. He couldn't wait to have Julian again. Except this time, he planned to take it slow.

In Julian's bedroom, under dim lights, Rob forced his hands to slow down as he stripped Julian. As for Julian, he wasn't helping at all. He tugged at Rob's clothes roughly, raked his fingers over his skin. His hooded eyes and parted lips urged Rob to just take him already.

His body overheated, heart thumping, teeth clenched against the growling moans that rumbled through him, Rob somehow held back. His reward for staying in control was Julian stretched out on the dark gray sheets of his big bed, inviting him to climb on top.

Still Rob held off even as his cock jutted out ready and aching for Julian. His eyes roamed Julian's body – gorgeous, naked, and all his. Sitting up with a groan, Julian reached for him, but with a hand on his chest, Rob pushed him back down.

"Settle down, I need to spend some time on this perfect body," Rob ordered him as he ran his hand down his chest and over his abs, skipped around his cock and caressed his thigh.

"No. You are perfect," Julian panted as he arched his hips, his cock seeking contact with any part of Rob.

Rob pressed him to the mattress by his hip and leaned down to speak right in his ear. "I don't want to hear any arguments from you, just moaning and begging."

Julian laughed shakily, but soon he was kissed and licked everywhere, bitten in a few places too. Rob tasted almost every inch of him over and over again until Julian was a begging and moaning mess and more than ready for Rob to finally take him in his mouth.

Rob let Julian's hard, glistening cock enter the heat of his mouth slowly to the sound of Julian muffled, agonized cries. But he wasn't getting his satisfaction that way as Rob sucked lazily, priming Julian for more.

Julian got the idea. Hissing in a breath, he reached his arms up, stretched himself out, shuddered then opened his bedside drawer.

"I need you," he said as he fumbled blindly. It was no good. Finally he just yanked the drawer out and dumped it out on the bed. "I can't

wait. I can't take this any more." He was shivering, feverish, a man pushed to the edge, but it was Rob who felt like he had to fuck Julian or he would die.

His cock was so painfully hard, he didn't know how he managed to lube them both, get on a condom and then enter Julian so nice and slow. Not that there was anything nice about the way Julian cursed under his breath and whimpered as Rob filled him up.

In Julian's eyes, Rob could see flashes of pain pushed aside by burning need. At that moment, he was jealous. He wanted to feel that too with Julian on top.

But not right now. Right now he wanted to keep pushing Julian harder, deeper, over the edge. Rob wanted to make Julian scream even if he couldn't, make him claw at him and bite his shoulder instead. Make him gasp Rob's name as his body went wild. Thrusting up while Rob pumped into him, Julian slammed their bodies together until they both came like an earthquake.

Rob collapsed, moaning, groping Julian's slick body everywhere. His own body wouldn't settle down, couldn't be convinced that it was satisfied. He couldn't get enough of Julian, but Rob finally slowed his breathing, quieted his heart a little and just held Julian against him tight.

"Mmm," Rob moaned against his neck as he leaned in to nuzzle him, heard his breathing become soft and even, felt his body grow heavy.

Exhausted, Julian was soon asleep, and Rob wanted to bury his face in the crook of his neck, wrap his arms around him and stay like that all night, or forever.

That scary word woke him up just as he might have fallen asleep like that. Careful not to wake him, Rob released Julian and it hurt. It hurt to leave his bed. It hurt even more to realize how much he wanted this not to end.

Chapter 22

Julian started out his day worrying about the cloudy sky he saw out the window. If the weather stayed overcast like that or if it rained, their day of volunteering was going to be miserable. As it was, Julian wasn't hopeful about being of much use.

Without asking, Rico had put down Julian and Rob's names, signing them up to volunteer. Then Lara saw what he had done and called to ask if she should scratch them off the list. Julian couldn't let her do that, and Rob agreed to go along with it too. It wasn't a good idea to let Rico win, but it was for a good cause.

Cramming as much work as he could into the morning hours to free up the rest of his day, Julian had closed himself off in his office. He was on track to finish up soon when he got a call from his temporary boss.

It had been several days since he had to deal with Thayer, but it was still too soon to have to do it again. He had to answer his calls though. Of course Thayer didn't want to talk business. He was more interested in what Julian might be up to in his personal life, but even for him, his lurid imagination seemed to be in overdrive.

After mentioning Rob half a dozen times, Thayer had some unwanted advice. "Just make sure to keep your bad boy on a tight leash. You don't want him forgetting who's in charge," Thayer was saying.

Julian could hear him tapping his fingers on his desk, but he tried to ignore his words. "I'll come up with some alternative renewable energy options for the Hallman portfolio."

Just like Julian did his best to ignore what he said, Thayer did the same to him. "Don't tell me he already has you wearing the leash." Thayer laughed and Julian hung up.

With Thayer's grating laugh still in his ears, Julian hissed in a breath through gritted teeth then let it out slowly. Getting pissed off wouldn't do him any good, but maybe it was past time he started recording his conversations with Thayer. Julian was about to call up his lawyer to get some legal guidelines on the issue when Rob came in. Seeing his cheerful expression, Julian decided to put off the call for later. He saw no reason to ruin Rob's good mood.

"You look cheerful," Julian said to him.

"Check it out. The weather cleared up just in time," Rob said and pointed out the window.

Preoccupied with Thayer, Julian hadn't noticed that the clouds had dispersed. "So you like the idea of volunteering that much?"

Rob shrugged. "Danny can't wait to go, and you know I like to drag

you out of the office every chance I get, especially when you're wearing an expression like that one." As Rob gave him a questioning look, Julian sighed.

"Thayer," was all Julian said about his call with him, and Rob's expression darkened right on cue. Getting up from behind his desk, Julian gave him a reassuring smile. "I survived it. Now I want to forget it. Let's get Danny and Lenny and go volunteer."

They arrived outside the Peach Tree Elementary School and joined about a dozen other people who were waiting for their work assignments. Danny and Lenny were both excited to be there. Though the sun was shining, the day was still chilly. Julian was glad when Noreen came to collect Danny and Lenny to join the kids working on some project inside where it was warm.

"So you guys showed up," Rico said as he and Mitch came over.

"Did you know he conscripted us?" Rob asked Mitch, who didn't look surprised to hear it.

"I baited the hook with Rob. And I reeled in this fish," Rico bragged and threw an arm over Julian's shoulders. "I just want to see him do some menial labor. Get all sweaty." While saying that, Rico gave Rob a wicked grin.

Lara showed up just then to hand out the assignments. As she consulted her clipboard, she assigned Rob and Julian to work together helping build picnic tables for something she called a Pilgrim Tavern. Rob might be up for that, but Julian was sure to be out of his element.

"I'm going to be useless," Julian grumbled once Lara was gone.

"Just sweat real pretty for Rob. That's all you need to do," Rico said and slapped Julian on the back. Then he and Mitch went off and finally there was some peace and quiet.

Honestly, Julian was just relieved that he and Rob didn't get separated. Their work was mostly carrying pieces of lumber and holding up various pieces to be cut and joined. Rob wasn't half bad and he even picked up a few new skills. On the other hand, Julian was just as inept as he feared he would be. He did break a sweat, as instructed.

Working alongside Rob at something physical was a new experience. Julian found he liked it, and he wondered if this was why Rico chose to work as Mitch's assistant. Getting to watch Rob show his strength and skill was an undeniable turn-on.

Without meaning to, Julian kept catching Rob's eye and getting a smile in return. In front of all the other people working there, it made him blush a little. Open flirting wasn't really in his repertoire.

When they were done and waiting for Danny and the other kids to

come out, Julian was dirty and tired but pretty happy. Rob grinned at him approvingly. "You're a good worker, you know."

"Do you have to sound so surprised?" Julian asked him.

Rob chuckled. "I guess when you put your mind to it, you can do anything."

"It was really good of you to volunteer with me considering that you don't live here," Julian told him. He meant to express his gratitude and how much he liked working with him, but Rob didn't take it that way.

His face fell and he looked away. "Right. I don't," Rob said and he tried to hide how hurt he was.

"No. I didn't mean that. I meant to..." Julian stopped there and then took the plunge and tentatively asked, "Would you want to live here?"

Rob stood to face him and the smile returned to his face. "If you're here then, yeah, I would."

Julian was so happy to hear that. "I'm glad. Does that mean you'll be here for Thanksgiving? I understand if you want to go and be with your family."

"If I was going to some big family dinner, you and Danny would be invited too," Rob told him. "But my dad is spending Thanksgiving with his girlfriend. Her daughter's baby wasn't well so they're sticking close to home. I'm not sure if Christie is going over there."

"Does that mean you can have Thanksgiving here with us?" Julian said hopefully. "You could invite your sister, and maybe she could stay a few days."

"OK. I'll ask her," Rob said, his eyes bright.

"Look at him. He's a different man when he's looking at you," Rico said as he appeared next to Julian. He was squinting at Rob, whose expression had changed to a scowl thanks to Rico teasing him.

"We were just discussing Thanksgiving. Rob is going to be inviting his sister," Julian told him as Sam and Wyatt arrived for their own volunteering shift, bringing their kids as well as their dogs.

"You're inviting her to a Thanksgiving with two guys who can't cook?" Rico asked.

"Just don't try to cook the turkey. Don't even touch the turkey. Don't even look at the turkey," Sam told them.

"We only want to eat the turkey," Rob reassured him.

"In that case come over and have Thanksgiving at Grandma's," Rico told them. "My parents are coming, so we're all having it over there."

"She did invite us," Julian said, but he was going to decline.

"We are going and some of Wyatt's friends will be there too," Sam told them.

"And I was really looking forward to figuring out how to tackle a turkey," Wyatt said.

"You understand that people want to be able to eat a turkey, right?"

Rico asked him.

"That would be the general idea," Wyatt said.

"I mean eat the turkey and not die," Rico said to make himself absolutely clear.

"So will you guys be there?" Mitch asked Julian and Rob.

They looked at each other. "We could go, right?" Rob said.

"OK. I'll let Mrs. Del Rio know," Julian said. He wasn't sure what kind of Thanksgiving it would be, but he liked the feeling of making plans with Rob.

It wasn't long before the kids started to come out from the school. Watching Danny leading Lenny out the big front doors gave Julian a preview of what it would be like to pick up his little brother at the end of a school day. Gloria and Sammy came out with them, and they all ran over to the Hayes boys and their dogs.

Wyatt told them their plans. "After we load up on some supplies, we're going to go paint the pie float at the Lubbock's barn. It's nice there and the weather has warmed up. We're taking the girls with us. Danny and Lenny should come with us too. What do you say?"

Hearing the invitation, all the kids stared at Julian eagerly while he considered it.

"Let all the dogs and all the kids stay together, Mr. Julian," Gloria urged him and all the other kids clamored their agreement.

There was a hopeful look in Danny's eyes so Julian said yes. He got down to give Danny a hug and told him, "If you need anything, Sam or Wyatt can get me or Rob on the phone right away."

Then it was Rob's turn and he got on one knee in front of Danny. "Be good and listen to the grown ups and have fun."

"I can send you guys updates and pictures," Sam offered. He always knew how to reassure Julian.

"It's a plan," Rico said. "And this means that you two should go get busy."

"I will be busy working," Julian told him, but Rico refused to accept that.

"What's wrong with you? This is a prime makeout opportunity," he said in a low, urgent voice. Clapping both Julian and Rob on the shoulders, he pushed them together and got in their personal space. "You're wearing comfortable clothing. You're a little filthy, a little sweaty. Make the most of it." Rico threw in a wiggle of his eyebrows and an evil chuckle.

With a sigh, Sam pushed his way in front of him. "He means take some time to be alone or whatever," Sam said getting a little embarrassed as he looked between them. "We'll have fun with Danny and Lenny. You make sure to have fun too." Sam had a more low key

way of putting it, but he obviously had the same idea as Rico.

As they all went off and he and Rob waved to them, Julian was kind of at a loss. "Where are we supposed to go?" he wondered.

Rob gave him a confident grin. "We'll go for a drive and see where the road takes us," he said decisively and took Julian's hand.

Julian wondered if he was going to take charge of their outing. He didn't mind since he had no idea what they could do together out here. Doing things on the spur of the moment wasn't his strong suit anyway. He just couldn't say no to a chance to be alone with Rob for a while.

With Rob behind the wheel, they drove past the school fence and got on the river road. Knowing Julian didn't want to go too far in case Danny needed them, Rob picked a spot by the riverside. They went over a small hill, then down and found themselves in a valley with birch trees all around.

"Did you know this was here?" Julian asked as he got out of the car and admired the spot where the river flowed by gently and birch trees dropped yellow leaves on the ground.

"No. Just luck," Rob said as he got out and let his green eyes travel up from the white bark of the trees to the yellow canopies above.

Soft earth and dry leaves under their feet, they walked around with their hands clasped and their fingers entwined. The path led them to the top of the hill. Coming out from among the trees into a clearing overlooking the river, they were greeted with brilliant sunshine and the brass and copper of autumn reflected in the river's flow.

"The back seat is clear. Just reminding you," Rob said after they had been looking at the view for a while.

They had transferred Danny's car seat to Wyatt's car. Julian had to laugh, but he wasn't sure he was brave enough to do anything in the back seat in the middle of the day. He could hardly believe he was even out here with Rob like this, and he couldn't help asking himself what it meant, if anything.

Rob noticed his hesitation and pointed his thumb back the way they came. "I made sure to pick a nice, secluded spot."

It was true that Julian couldn't see the car clearly among the trees, and with every moment, he was tempted more and more to give in. Then he noticed something in the distance and he frowned.

"What is it?" Rob asked noticing the shift in his mood right away.

Julian had seen a familiar sight across the river. It reminded him that they hadn't gone that far from the town. "That's the cemetery," Julian said thinking of the slab of expensive, black marble that marked his grandfather's grave. "I keep thinking I should pay my grandfather's

grave a visit, but then I remember how he tried to kill everything in me that made me who I was."

"He didn't," Rob said and took him by the shoulders gently so he could gaze into his eyes.

"I'm not so sure. I think I would be a much better big brother to Danny if I hadn't fallen under my grandfather's influence."

Rob denied it. "No way. You're the perfect big brother, and Danny adores you."

"He's a sweet boy. I think he overlooks my faults," Julian said, thinking of Danny with love.

"You don't have any faults," Rob said too sharply and Julian raised an eyebrow at him. For a moment, Rob looked like he was about to take it back, but he didn't. "Am I supposed to hide how much I like you?"

Now Julian got flustered and looked away. He had to say something, but he couldn't get the words out. This was his grandfather's stamp on him. He just couldn't express his emotions.

"I will restrain myself if you want me to. I don't have to share every one of my thoughts and feelings with you," Rob said, and Julian took a quick, painful breath. But then Rob's voice got thick and low and he took Julian's hand and kissed it. "I won't tell you how fast my heart beats because of you, or how happy I am just to look at you."

For too long Julian just felt stunned, ready to lose himself in Rob's green eyes, but then he found his voice, a little bit at least.

"Don't hold back with me," Julian finally told him in a single exhaled breath. Those words had rushed headlong out of him before he could stop them. He was dying to hear more, to feel everything Rob felt.

"OK," Rob said simply and smiled, but Julian was too uncertain and hopeful, wondering what might happen next.

"I never know what the next step should be," Julian confessed.

"We kiss and then go back to the car so I can suck you boneless," Rob said in a gravelly voice. Slowly he leaned in, leaving plenty of time for Julian to stop him. The tension seemed to stretch on forever like endless falling. Then their lips met, touching, caressing.

Rob's hands gripped him hard by the arms pulled him in for a deeper kiss full of heat and longing. And Julian responded, showing him what he couldn't put into words, answering with his own heat.

He was clutching Rob by the back of his neck and around the waist. Rob's arms were around him too. They were locked together kissing like they wouldn't stop for anything. But they did, and Julian held onto fistfuls of Rob's jacked and just breathed.

"Let's get into that back seat before I do something indecent to you right here," Rob told him in a rough voice and they hurried off to the car.

Hot for each other, impatient for naked skin under their hands and

mouths, they kissed and groped their way under each other's clothes. Pushing Rob's jacket off his shoulders, Julian fumbled with his fly and got the same treatment from Rob.

As soon as Julian had his fly undone, he was reaching past the zipper and the thick denim, to feel Rob through the soft fabric of his boxers. Hearing him grunt, Julian couldn't wait to get the boxers out of his way too.

He pushed down the waistband and had his fingers circling hard flesh. Rob wasn't in the right position though, so Julian pushed him down. Leaning against the door and window, long legs spread wide, Rob made room for him and stroked his fingers through Julian's hair, murmuring curses and encouragements while Julian bent over his cock.

When Julian wrapped his lips around the head and licked, he made Rob moan and buck his hips. Loving the way Rob pushed into his mouth, Julian hummed around his cock and took him even further down. Then he was losing himself to the feeling, sucking and bobbing his head purely on instinct.

"Fuck, Julian," Rob groaned as he mussed his hair. But soon he was lost to the feeling too.

Head thrown back, resting against the window, broad chest expanding with labored breathing, he was looking down at Julian with hooded eyes. The smoldering look in them drove Julian to suck deeper, faster, harder. A pained moan told Julian to get ready and soon he was swallowing and licking up Rob's come.

It seemed like it took only a breath for Rob to have him on his back with his jeans and his boxers down so he could pin his hips to the car seat. Rob's fingers felt hard, unyielding, even cruel, but his tongue was pure sweetness, pure bliss as it licked him up and down then tortured the head of his cock for a while.

In vein, Julian tried to breathe through it, but the sensation was just too much, too good. After sucking off Rob, he was too pent up with need. He moaned and begged for release, but Rob licked him thoroughly and sucked him so slowly.

Time stretched out while Julian rode the edge of coming. This went on until Rob decided it was time to take Julian over the edge. With a mixture of relief and almost painful extreme of pleasure, Julian came, spilling down Rob's throat, calling his name in a guttural voice.

Panting, kissing, mingling their tastes, they were entwined in the back seat for a while. No thought, no memory, nothing in his head, Julian hardly knew his own name. He just kept saying Rob's, whispering it in his ear as he nibbled it.

"Nothing feels as good as you," Rob told him.

"It's you. I don't know how to be like this without you," Julian

confessed and kissed him with a passion he never knew he had inside him until this man came along.

Chapter 23

Mitch and Rico were done dismantling the big office, and now they were installing new shelving. Some of the pieces were stacked in the front hall. Coming back from washing his hands after walking Lenny with Danny, Rob stopped to admire the nice looking, probably expensive wood. While Mitch checked things over and flipped through papers on his clipboard, Rob told him, "I can't wait to see Julian sitting in that big office."

"Aha," Mitch said while eyeing him knowingly.

"What? I just don't like to see Julian holding himself back from taking what's rightfully his," Rob said.

"And what's holding you back?" Mitch asked.

"What are you accusing me of?" Rob asked then he admitted the truth "I lost my mom when I was a teenager. It's not easy for me to believe that anything good can last."

"I remember that feeling," Mitch said and a very sad look came over his chiseled features. "When Sammy's mom died, her grandmother tried to take her away from me. My fear from that time stayed with me for too long, until I met Rico." Now Mitch's face brightened like Rico's name was magic.

"I guess I have to figure out how to let go of my fear too," Rob said.

"It will be worth it," Mitch told him and he smiled.

Yeah, he was a man who was ready to be happy. He and Rob both headed to Julian's office and found Rico in there lamenting the loss of the bar they had removed from the big office.

"Too bad about the bar. A bar in the office is so *Mad Men*," Rico said while shaking his head at the empty space where the bar used to be.

"Are you bothering Julian again?" Rob demanded.

"What are you, the manny or the bouncer?" Rico asked.

"Yes," Rob said then turned to Julian. "Want me to toss him out?"

"We're working here," Rico claimed.

"Not in here, we aren't," Mitch said and pointed him toward the other office.

Rico turned to him. "Rob is so possessive. He's afraid someone else will notice Julian's pouty mouth, dark good looks, ass that begs to be..."

"Hey!" Rob warned him before he could finish and Julian dropped his head to his desk.

"I was just reading your mind, wasn't I?" Rico accused Rob. "You wanted to rescue your precious Julian from me. This is what you get."

"I need hazard pay dealing with you," Rob told him.

"This from a man who was just gladly picking up after the dog,"

Mitch pointed out.

"Ugh." Rico turned away from Rob in disgust and kissed Mitch. "He's all yours," he said to Julian while pointing his thumb at Rob then he walked away, ready to actually do some work.

"Are you sure you like him?" Rob asked Mitch as he was about to get to work too.

"I'm very sure," Mitch said without taking his eyes off Rico's retreating form.

"That's love, all right," Rob said.

"Yeah," Mitch agreed on a sigh. He had such a soft look in his eyes that Rob felt like he was seeing right into his heart. It was a little embarrassing to get such an intimate glimpse into exactly what he was feeling, but also kind of nice.

As he shut the door between the two offices, Rob was amazed that Mitch ever took a chance on someone like Rico. It gave him hope that Julian might take a chance on him. Julian was buttoned up pretty tight, but if a stoic like Mitch and someone as flippant and loudmouthed as Rico had so much real emotion to offer each other, maybe there was hope for him and Julian too.

That's when he noticed that Julian was holding a photo and looking at it very intently.

"I came across this picture of my father as I was going through some old papers. I wanted to show it to Danny," Julian said. He handed the photo to Rob, and he saw a good-looking guy, who looked a lot like Julian, leaning against a red Lamborghini. Even in the photo, the resemblance didn't go deeper than looks. The guy in the photo grinned and lounged against that sport scar like he didn't have a care in the world.

"He looks like a guy who knew how to live it up," Rob said, still looking at the picture.

"He did, but he didn't know how to be a father," Julian told him.

"Sorry," Rob said as he wondered if Julian might think of him as the same type of guy. While Julian was so serious and focused, Rob had been going through life rudderless all this time. Maybe Julian would never think of him as anything more than a hook-up.

Hearing the work start up in the next office, Rob reminded himself about the guys making all that noise. Rob wasn't going to make it easy for Julian to dismiss him. For now he just went with him to look for Danny.

They found him sitting on the stairs, stacking colorful, wooden letters to build a tower. As they sat on either side of him, Julian showed him the photo.

"That guy standing next to the red car is our dad," Julian told him.

"Our dad," Danny whispered like those words were magic. "He has a

red car, but he doesn't live anywhere." Danny now turned sad and Rob looked over at Julian.

They both put their arms around Danny, and Julian told his little brother, "You can keep this picture if you want."

Danny nodded then started to look around and call for Lenny. Getting up, Julian stayed close to Rob and explained in a low voice. "When I told Danny that we had the same dad, he asked me where he lived. I told him he didn't live anywhere. Then I tried to explain death to him, that it means someone is gone and never coming back." Julian exhaled a shaky breath, and Rob could tell what a difficult conversation that must have been.

"There isn't a good way to explain it," Rob told him then they heard Danny's calls for Lenny growing more frantic.

"I lost Lenny," Danny hiccupped as he ran over to them.

"He isn't lost," Rob reassured him. "He's around here somewhere."

Danny called for Lenny tearfully as they took him into the living room then the library and the smaller office. When Lenny didn't show himself, Danny looked up at Julian and blinked back tears. "I don't know where he is."

"We'll find him," Julian promised.

"We'll ask if Mitch and Rico have seen him," Rob said.

Going into the big office, they heard a lot of banging and drilling, and Rob had to yell over the noise to get their attention.

"I lost Lenny. I called him and he didn't come," Danny said to them, sounding heartbroken.

"He probably couldn't hear you," Julian told him and smoothed back his hair.

"That's because of all the noise we were making," Rico said. "We won't make any more noise until you find him."

Danny called again, but his voice wasn't very loud now that he was so upset.

"You want us to help you look?" Mitch asked.

Danny nodded. Mitch and Rico went to search the dining room, and Julian and Rob took Danny into the kitchen. As he called plaintively for Lenny, Danny's voice still didn't carry far, so Rob and Julian called for him too.

Back in the front hall, Danny called Lenny's name and this time they heard the jingle of his dog tags. Then there was a sharp yip just before Lenny ran over on his tiny feet. The little guy was under the stairs the whole time.

"Lenny, you're here," Danny said and got down to hug his precious dog. Danny gathered the little doggy to him and called his name more happily now. He then picked up Lenny and carried him over to Mitch and Rico to show them that he was found.

"Thanks guys," Rob said to Rico and Mitch while they both petted Lenny.

"This guy would never go anywhere without you," Mitch reassured Danny before he and Rico went back to work.

Danny gave Lenny a stern look as he held him in his arms. "Don't ever go anywhere, Lenny. And you don't go anywhere too, Rob," he said and fixed Rob with a very serious look.

"Me? I'm right here," Rob assured him.

Then Danny assured him right back. "Don't worry, Rob. I'm not gonna take away your shoes."

"My shoes?" Rob looked at Julian, but he only shook his head.

Danny was ready to explain. "Ry said to take your shoes, but the other kids said, 'Nooo!'"

"OK," Rob said still confused.

"Why did Riley want you to take Rob's shoes?" Julian asked.

"So he won't go away," Danny said.

"This was something you talked over with the other kids?" Rob asked.

"Yes," Danny said with a nod. "We talked about important stuff when we were painting the pies. Then they told me about dates."

"Uh, they did?" Rob said and gave Julian a quick glance.

"Do you know about dates?" Danny asked both of them.

"We've heard of them," Julian told his little brother.

"He learns so much from those kids," Rob said as he and Julian eyed each other apprehensively.

Once Danny had gone off with Lenny, Julian sighed. "He got so scared just because he couldn't find Lenny for a little bit. And he's worried about losing you too." Now Julian looked at him long and hard. "I don't want to pressure you."

"You aren't," Rob said, not sure what he was getting at.

"I think Danny is right about dating, about making this official," Julian said kind of stiffly.

"Official?"

"Sorry. I don't know how to do this." Julian slumped down and got that helpless look that always touched Rob's heart.

"Wanna go out?" Rob said to show him how easy it was.

Julian laughed. "Yes. I'd love to go out with you."

Taking him in his arms, Rob kissed him. "This isn't complicated. It's just you and me."

"Right," Julian said and lowered his eyes for a moment before he squared his shoulders and gazed at Rob again. "I've lived more than half my life hiding my emotions. For Danny's sake, I can't afford to be that way any more. I want to do better for you and for Danny. Be a

better man."

Rob didn't see it that way. He felt like Julian was more open and closer to him than anyone had ever been. "You're wonderful," Rob told him, running his thumb over his lips. At those words, Rob watched Julian's eyes shine and his face light up with a big smile. Rob kissed that smile and felt it go all through him like his whole world opening up.

Chapter 24

It was their last day of volunteering, unfortunately Julian was working alone, taking inventory. There was some talk of having him help hang up banners, but then Lara decided he was better suited for counting the cardboard leaves, and acorn and pumpkin shaped lanterns that were going up on the morning of the festival. While he was noting down what they had in stock and missing Rob, he saw Sam and Rico coming over. They told him they had just finished a shift at the café, and it fell to Julian to tell Rico why he was there working by himself.

"Rob was recruited to help Mitch."

Of course this set Rico off. "Excuse me. I have to go kill something blond."

Luckily Sam restrained and then distracted him with talk about Thanksgiving at his grandmother's.

"I was looking forward to a real, family Thanksgiving, but this will be more fun for the kids," Sam said.

Agreeing with that, Julian nodded. He had pictured just him, Rob and Danny. Now Rob's sister would be joining them, so why not go where the rest of the town was gathering.

"Kids are sure to love the turkey jamboree." Off Julian's look, Rico denied responsibility. "That's what Grandma calls it. My parents are going to be there. They already know and love Mitch, now the rest of you guys need to show them what awesome friends I have. Don't let me down." He looked sternly at both Sam and Julian.

"Speaking of impressing people. Rob and I are going out on a date, but I'm not sure where. I would love to whisk him away, but I want to stay close by in case Danny has a bad night," Julian told them. It felt strange to discuss something like that. Being so closed off until now, he didn't have anyone he wanted to date or anyone to talk to about things like that.

"I'm on the case," Rico said stepping up. "This is a beautiful thing between a man and his manny, and I want to make it happen."

"Can you be serious?" Sam asked him. He looked like he might have a suggestion, but Rico jumped in ahead of him.

"What about Raffinger's?" Rico asked.

"That's a bar and grill, right?" Julian said. That wasn't really his kind of thing.

Rico objected to his tone. "Don't say it like that. Mitch and I had our first date there."

"Sorry," Julian said, then he realized he shouldn't be so negative in case Rob would want to go there. For Rob's sake, he changed his tune.

"I'll consider it."

In truth, no place seemed good enough to him. He had the urge to take Danny along and fly Rob somewhere exclusive and expensive, but he knew it wasn't about that. What Julian wanted was to show him that he was serious and to find out just how serious Rob was about him.

"The place isn't that important, really," Sam said echoing his thoughts. "You don't have to be doing anything special. It's just about being together."

"What BS is this?" Rico snapped at them. "You need to step up your game, woo that man."

"Like you're not happy just to get to sit in Mitch's lap," Sam accused him.

"You're getting indecent," Rico said wickedly.

"That is not what I meant," Sam claimed then he changed his mind. "Or maybe I did."

"You guys are being really helpful," Julian said to them.

"You wanted helpful? You're talking to the wrong guys," Rico said while Sam gave him a speak for yourself look.

"So you'll need babysitting when you go on your date, right?" Sam said.

"Rob's sister will be here. She offered to babysit," Julian told him.

"Your place isn't ready to be shown to the in-laws yet," Rico said jumping way ahead. "But it is looking more like a hillside villa and less like the house of the undead. Just picture it in the spring with everything green and the peach trees in bloom, and you with your man by your side."

Julian had to smile at that image. "Sounds good."

"Aha, don't screw up this date," Rico said.

"Stop pressuring him," Sam told him then he had some advice for Julian too. "Just have fun on this date. That's all you need to do."

That was a lot like the attitude Rob had about it, but Julian felt that there was a lot more to it. He needed to win Rob, make him never want to leave.

"I'm in the killing mood again," Rico announced in a dark voice as he glared at something over Julian shoulder.

Turning in the direction of Rico's glare, Julian saw that Rob was on his way back in the company of Wyatt and Mitch.

"You two blond bookends get away from my man," Rico demanded.

"Did he just call us blond bookends?" Rob asked Wyatt, but he was busy throwing his arm over Mitch's shoulder to mess with Rico.

Rico scoffed at him. "Nice try. Mitch would never cheat on me. You hussies don't stand a chance."

"Now he's calling us hussies," Rob said while Wyatt and Sam kissed hello.

"Let's go get our assignments. It looks like Lara is getting ready to leave," Mitch told Rico after quieting him with a kiss.

Lara didn't have the clipboard she always carried, but she told the guys what was left to be done. "If you need anything else, ask Mr. Florez. My sister, Stella, took my car to go shopping. I'm waiting for her to pick me up. My family all got scattered and I got stuck with her for Thanksgiving."

"Stella. Yay." Rico said sarcastically.

"He's not a fan. They tussled a bit over Mitch," Lara said to Julian and Rob.

"And who won?" Rico asked her. "Come on. Don't keep us in suspense."

Lara only laughed.

Julian and Rob were done for the day and ready to pick up Danny. Julian heard his phone chime and saw that it was Mr. Upton, who wanted to FaceTime for some reason. "Sorry. I have to take this," he said to Rob and stepped away.

The way Mr. Upton was calling him made Julian wonder if he was about to be fired. "You look well, sir," he said to Upton when he showed up on his phone screen.

"I'm almost a hundred percent, and you look well too, Brenner. That's a relief."

"It is?" Julian said, a little bit confused.

"Talk was going around that you weren't doing well," Mr. Upton told him.

"I'm fine. I was just volunteering for the local Thanksgiving festival, actually," Julian told him as if that was proof of his fitness.

"Is that so? Hmm. It looks inviting. I wouldn't mind dropping by for that," Mr. Upton said unexpectedly, making Julian wonder if he wanted to check up on him.

"You're more than welcome to," he said.

"Don't worry," Mr. Upton assured him. "I won't interfere with your Thanksgiving dinner plans. I'll be there probably around noon."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing you, sir," Julian told him.

"Likewise. Take care of yourself, Brenner."

Setting his phone aside, Julian couldn't help but frown. Then Rob was at his side, looking at him questioningly.

"That was Mr. Upton. It sounds like Thayer has been maneuvering against me with him. Upton thought there might be something wrong with me. God knows what Thayer told him. I was relieved not to get fired, but I still think it might happen. Mr. Upton is coming here for

the festival."

Rob was surprised. "You think that's a bad sign?"

"I think he might be coming to check up on me or fire me in person," Julian said gloomily.

"What did he say exactly?" Rob wanted to know.

"That I looked surprisingly well and that this place looked 'inviting'." Julian looked around. "Maybe he caught sight of the hill."

"Or maybe that's what he saw." Rob pointed directly behind Julian, where Lara and a very attractive blonde just happen to be standing. "Could that be the view that has your boss running over here?"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking like a heterosexual. Lara said her sister was picking her up. That must be her," Julian said seeing the curvy blonde who was standing by Lara's car. He didn't recognize her from his younger days, but maybe she didn't used to be a blonde. "That view might be to his liking, but it's not his only reason for coming here. This is because of Thayer's backstabbing. Word from the office is that he's finding fault with my work, and of course I'm not there to correct the record."

"This will be your chance. It's better to do that when you're face to face with Upton," Rob said, looking on the bright side.

Julian smiled. "I'll do that. If he gives me a chance. Then there's your sister's visit. I want to make a good impression on her too."

"Leave that to Danny and Lenny. She already loves those guys," Rob told him and threw an arm around him.

Julian couldn't be easygoing about it though. There was so much happening, but the biggest thing to him was the date he had to arrange on short notice and everything he wanted to say to Rob.

Chapter 25

To Rob it was just a visit from his sister, but Danny had been keyed up since he got up that morning, and Julian made sure everything was perfect for the lunch they were serving her, down to the last detail. Rob was getting regular updates from Christie on her trip over, even a picture of the car and driver that Julian sent to pick her up. In return, Rob sent her a picture of Danny and Lenny impatiently waiting for her.

"Christie is coming," Danny said, bouncing on his toes as he kept looking out the front window for her.

"You know, she's our first guest here," Julian told him, coming out of his office to join them.

"That's a special honor. I'll let Christie know," Rob said. Then a little later, he let them know that she was only a few minutes away.

That's when Danny and Lenny took a position right by the front doors. They were the first thing Christie saw when Rob opened the door to her.

"I know you. You're Christie!" Danny said, then he got shy and tried to hide behind Rob.

"I know you too, Danny. And I know Lenny," she said and got down to pet him. "What a good dog you are."

"He is," Danny confirmed.

It didn't take Danny as long to warm up to her as it did with other people when he first met them. Rob had them talk on the phone and Skype, so Christie wasn't a complete stranger.

After introductions, Rob picked up her bag from the foyer and took her upstairs so they could have a minute alone. "Check out your room."

"Wow. It's amazing," she said going straight to the window. "And the view of the river is incredible."

"Mine has the view of the orchard," Rob told her and pointed across the hall."

"You seem so different," Christie said while she took a seat on the windowsill and stared up at him.

"Me? No way. I'm the same old Rob."

"You're more..." She had to stop and think. "I don't know. More you."

"What? You're not making sense," Rob told her and set down her bag by the bed.

"I know. I mean you're more the way you used to be before Mom died." As always there was a catch in her voice when she mentioned Mom. "You look like you're ready to take charge of the whole world."

"I'm only in charge of Danny and Lenny," Rob told her.

"I can't believe I get those two cuties all to myself tonight," she said and rubbed her hands together.

"Danny will be asleep, hopefully," Rob told her.

"I guess he will, and I still can't get over you being a manny," she said.

"It just kind of happened."

"You know, I was sure you took this job because you were giving up, backsliding. Another dead end job so you don't have to face the future," she said with a sad smile while Rob glared at her.

"But now you see you were wrong," he told her.

"I see you're coming to life more, but I'm still not sure all of this is right for you," she said and pointed all around. "The big house, the small town, a job with no future."

"Christie," Rob said with a heavy sigh. "I get that you're trying to be a good big sister, but knock it off. I'm where I want to be." To Rob this wasn't just a job, this was Julian and Danny right there every day together with him.

"Fine," she huffed, giving up for now.

"Lunch is ready for you. Let's go eat. We'll see if Danny and Lenny will let you boss them around."

Christie didn't try to boss anyone around. Danny and Lenny disarmed her. She was putty in their hands and pretty good company as they all spent time together for the rest of the day.

Danny was excited about her visit and the festival tomorrow. Rob was anticipating his date with Julian that very night. Time stretched on for him, and he was ready to drag Julian off somewhere right now, but first they had to put Danny to bed.

Once Danny was asleep, Julian went to get ready then he and Rob met up at the top of the stairs. As soon as he laid eyes on Julian, Rob had to get his hands on him.

"Looking like that, you won't even make it to the car in one piece," Rob said as he came up behind Julian and nuzzled his neck. "Hell, you might not make it downstairs."

Julian turned around to face him. He was like a vision of sexy elegance in a dark gray suit that was more fitted than the ones he had seen him wear to work. Rob didn't have anything like that. He put on a soft, beige V-neck sweater. With a buttoned down shirt under it, it didn't look half bad.

Julian took a long look at him and smiled. That was all the approval Rob needed.

"I don't know how I'll restrain myself either," Julian said with a grin as he ran his hands over Rob's chest.

They did make it downstairs after some kissing, and Christie was there to see them off. "You two have fun, and I'll keep a close eye on those guys," she promised them as she walked them to the door.

"Don't hesitate to call or text for any reason even if Danny wakes up and just wants to talk to us," Julian told her.

"OK. I won't hesitate," she promised Julian. Rob could tell that she didn't disapprove of how attentive he was to his little brother.

Julian had arranged for them to have dinner at the Stone Creek Inn, which was halfway between Peach Tree and Ashbury. The inn was in a beautiful old, building, and the grounds were even better with archways and trellised walkways. The gold and copper of autumn leaves was on display, but there was every sign that in spring and summer this place would become ridiculously lush.

"This is really nice. I didn't know a fancy place like this was out here," Rob said as the two of them walked the grounds.

Julian looked around like he didn't know what Rob was talking about. "Fancy?"

"I guess not fancy to you," Rob teased him. "I think it's perfect. Heck I'd be happy if we just had a picnic right out here."

Julian raised a eyebrow at that. "I'm glad you like it. You'll have a good view of all this from up there." Julian pointed out one of the balconies on the second floor of the inn.

"You booked us a room?" Rob guessed.

"Not only that. That table they're setting is for us."

Rob saw two people on one of the balconies, looking busy though he couldn't see the table from where he and Julian were standing. He was flattered that Julian was doing all this for him.

Since the staff was still setting up upstairs, they took their time strolling the inn garden. The sun was halfway behind the horizon, and the air was cooling so Rob put his arm around Julian as they walked. Other people were meandering down the paths too, but Rob hardly noticed them. Julian was everything to him as he held him close against his side.

Julian got a text that everything was ready for their date and they went up. Going through the double doors of their room, Rob took in the large, stone fireplace and the French windows leading to the balcony. A four-poster bed with crisp white linens dominated one side of the room and made Rob think of what might be happening there later.

But first Julian led him out to the balcony. The waiters, who had been there before, were gone now. The table was set and a cart next to

it held covered dishes.

"The balcony is our private dining room," Julian said.

"Wow, and it's heated," Rob noticed.

"Did you think I would let you freeze?" Julian asked as they kissed then took their seats at the table.

"I figured you'd find some other way to keep me warm," Rob said with a chuckle.

"I'll do that anyway," Julian told him, a sweet smile on his lips. Damn, Rob loved it when that man smiled.

"You know how to woo a guy," Rob said as Julian uncorked the wine.

"I'm glad you think so. You're the only guy I've ever tried to woo." Julian looked down shyly and his pouring wasn't a hundred percent steady.

Just as promised, the balcony gave them a great view of the grounds, which were growing shadowy this late in the evening. But as they watched, lanterns started to come on and illuminate the paths.

"Nice," Rob said.

The view was great, but his eyes stayed on Julian most of the time. He was beyond gorgeous. Rob couldn't believe he was sitting across a table from him, sipping expensive wine, eating incredible food, all chosen by Julian.

They started their dinner with a kabocha squash soup garnished with fried sage leaves. The main course was roast duck with mustard greens and a sour cherry vinaigrette. It was followed by brandy quince compote served with spiced shortbread triangles.

It wasn't the kind of food Rob usually ate, but it was good and he could tell Julian wanted this to be a special and memorable meal and he chose everything with care. It made Rob feel valued, a feeling he never experienced with anyone else.

Before now, dates were just something to do on the way to fucking, but this was completely different. Every moment with Julian was special, part of something bigger.

After dinner they got up and danced to the music that reached them from downstairs. Pressed close they swayed and then Julian whispered, "I'm actually happy."

"Don't be so surprised," Rob told him.

"But I am," Julian confessed and Rob drew back a little so he could see him better. As he looked into Julian's eyes, Rob could see both happiness and sadness in them. "I thought I would never be able to live any sort of life that was at all satisfying, that had any joy in it."

"And now?" Rob prompted him while nuzzling the side of his neck, rubbing his face against his beard.

"If you're asking if I'm satisfied...?" Julian paused to smirk at him.

"Not yet."

The music mingled with the breeze and washed over them softly. Their bodies fitting perfectly, impossibly close, they danced. The slow burning friction made Rob harder and Julian too. As close as they were, the arousal was undeniable and building with every swaying motion and every warm breath against Rob's earlobe as Julian sighed with pleasure.

Letting his lips brush Julian's beard, Rob growled his name. In an answering move, Julian traced Rob's clean-shaven jaw with his parted lips then rubbed his beard against his cheek.

Heat was coiling in Rob's belly, growing stronger working its way lower. Rob's hands moved along Julian's waist to his lower back then rubbed and lingered before following the perfect curve of his ass while Julian groped him the same way. The feel of it set Rob on fire. He needed Julian so much, but first there was something he needed more.

Pulling his head back to lock eyes with Julian, Rob took a shaky breath then he told him, "So this is love, huh?"

Julian's eyes went wide. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Both. I'm kind of amazed, kind of in shock. I didn't know it would feel so painfully good, so crazy."

"Me either. It scares me, but I love you anyway. I can't help it. I want a chance with you more than anything," Julian said breathlessly, like Rob's declaration had knocked the wind out of him.

"I want everything with you." Rob pressed a kiss to his lips, deep but soft then he told him. "I love you."

Still dancing and kissing they made their way inside. They stripped each other, discarding their clothes on the floor until they reached the bed, fully naked.

Julian pushed Rob down on the bed and kissed his way over his thighs and to his cock. He licked from his balls to the tip then let the head slide between his lips while he moaned. A few hard pulls and Rob was hissing between his teeth telling himself to hang on.

Easing off, Julian drew in a breath and took him deeper but sucked more gently. He was driving Rob wild, but he had to stop him. Rob murmured his name and finally told him what he wanted. "Julian. I want you to fuck me."

Julian stopped sucking and looked up at Rob questioningly.

"Please," Rob said to make himself clear.

"OK," Julian said softly and his kisses drifted up Rob's body until they he reached his mouth. They kissed and Rob got up, got condoms and lube and handed them to Julian.

Even as he took them from him and uncapped the lube, Julian was

still questioning him with those serious, dark eyes.

"I'm not trying to prove anything," Rob said to answer his unasked question. "I just want you."

Julian nodded and watched Rob get into position, propped up on pillows, legs spread out, eager for Julian. Kneeling between his outstretched legs, Julian first leaned in to kiss him then he spread some lube on his fingers.

He fingered Rob then kissed him with his fingers pumping inside him, driving him out of his mind. But that was just a taste, a tease. The real thing came soon after – Julian driving his cock inside him slowly, eyes so deadly serious. Then Julian was fucking him, every thrust sure and powerful like he knew exactly what Rob needed.

Rob loved it. More than anything he loved that it was Julian inside him, stretching him, making him keen and moan. Wanting to scream out, coming undone for him, because of him, this was something he never felt before and only wanted to feel with Julian.

No one else could get him to be this open and vulnerable, begging for more until Julian had him coming. Rob's cock held by the root, Julian let his come flow up and over his hand as he came inside him.

They were cleaning up, kissing, then Julian was lying with his head on his chest. Rob stroked his hair and down the back of his neck as he tried to put into words how Julian made him feel.

"I knew it would be like that, but I didn't know it would be like that," Rob said, and Julian laughed against him, shaking them both.

They kissed some more then quieted again. "You're good at this," Rob complimented him while Julian caressed his chest.

"I may have done it once or twice," Julian said modestly then he admitted something. "I usually topped, until you."

"So I'm special?" Rob asked kind of thrilled to hear it.

"You know you are," Julian said, his voice thick, and he turned to kiss Rob passionately. When he stopped, he told him more. "It just felt right with you, to let you in."

"Same here," Rob told him.

He knew there was a reason he wanted this and there it was – this feeling, this closeness. Overcome with the hot, sweet ache of it, he kissed Julian with so much blind desire, trying to let him know that this was everything to him. This was part of the love he felt for Julian.

Chapter 26

After the love they shared there, Julian wanted to stay in that bed with Rob and never leave, but he didn't want to be away from Danny all night. So they got out of bed in the middle of the night, drove back to the house and climbed into Julian's bed.

That meant dressing and then undressing each other again, touching warm skin until it became hot, kissing and getting to suck off Rob, taste him, love him in his own bed. Rob did the same for him.

Even as his eyes started to close, Julian thought he was too excited and happy to fall asleep, but being satisfied and exhausted won out.

In the morning, he took a deep breath against Rob's chest and woke up to Rob tilting his face up to kiss his eyelids.

"Good morning," Julian said with a lazy satisfied grin. "This is a nice way to wake up."

"Nothing nice about it. I'm waking you for purely selfish reasons. Time is short and I want to spent an eternity on you," Rob said and flipped him on his back.

Julian was struck by the word eternity but tried not to dwell on it. That word still spun around in his head. If he could spend an eternity like this with Rob, he would.

"I'm never going to be able to get enough of you," Rob said as his hands started to roam Julian's body and his hard cock pressed into his hip.

"Same here," Julian breathed. "I never want to leave this bed."

"Good. This is where I want you," Rob told him. He dipped his head down for a kiss then they heard a yippy little bark.

Rob raised his head and Julian groaned.

"Christie promised me she would keep them busy," Rob said just as they heard her telling Danny to show her the kitchen. Once they were gone, Rob pinned Julian to the bed and nibbled his way from his earlobe to his shoulder.

"I guess some peace and quiet is too much to expect on the day of the festival. This is the only time we're going to get alone together all day," Rob grumbled.

"We can shower together to make up for it," Julian suggested.

Rob grinned and kissed Julian long and hard to let him know he was taking him up on it.

Julian felt like he really owed Christie for looking after Danny and keeping him occupied that morning, but it seemed like she and Danny were having fun.

"You know I remember having a little brother. It wasn't like this," she said to Julian while they were waiting for Rob to finish helping Danny get ready for the festival. "From the second he was born, Rob bugged me so much. I guess it's different when your little brother is so much younger."

"Danny is very special to me," Julian told her, but he didn't think he could ever put into words how much Danny meant to him.

Christie looked at him oddly. "You're so different from what I expected. I thought you would be some arrogant, overbearing, high finance, Wall Street bro."

"Would Rob be interested in someone like that?" Julian couldn't imagine that be would be, but Christie wasn't so sure.

"I don't know. With men and with jobs, Rob always seemed to go wherever the wind blew him."

Looking at her as she said that, Julian saw more sadness than disapproval in her eyes. Julian wanted to say something to reassure her, but Danny was tromping down the stairs already followed by Rob. Danny was chattering to Lenny about the festival and why doggies couldn't go, and Rob was impossibly gorgeous.

The theme of the festival was fall colors and food. They could see some of the decorations they helped with and there would be more. Danny was excited but with so many people filling the sidewalks, he stayed close to Julian and Rob. Plenty of tourists had come for the festival, so the crowds were bigger than at Halloween but not as scary-looking.

While keeping an eye out for people they knew, they showed off the town to Christie. "The food you liked so much came from there," Rob told her while pointing out the Peach Tree Café. "Some friends of ours work there."

"Calling them 'our' friends already," Christie said, teasing him.

Rob denied it. "Did I say friends? I meant some guys, some random guys. Sam is really nice though." Leaning over, Rob told Julian. "All morning I kept waiting for Rico to show up at the last minute with some crazy costumes for us. Making us dress up as turkeys or pumpkins or something."

He looked grim but Julian had to laugh. "We got here safely."

Danny looked up at them, and he seemed a little nervous with so many people there.

"He's not loving this crowd," Rob said.

As he looked down at Danny to reassure him, Julian saw his face break out into a big smile. He had spotted the other kids, and they were all running over to him noisily, talking over each other about

food and games.

Now that he was surrounded by the other kids, Danny didn't seem scared at all. They were so good at distracting him, he hardly seemed to notice the crowd.

All the kids were there in one group but not the guys. Lara and Noreen where with them along with a pretty brunette. Lara started by introducing her to everyone.

"This Wyatt's friend, Raquel," Lara said then she introduced Julian and Rob to her. "And this is Julian's little brother, Danny."

"Hi there. Are you friends with Riley and DJ?" Raquel asked Danny.

"Everybody's friends with me and Lenny," Danny said and Julian couldn't believe how much it warmed his heart to hear it.

"Lenny is his little dog," Noreen explained.

"That's great. Then we should be friends too," Raquel told him.

Christie got introduced to everyone next, starting with the kids, but right away, Lara made a grab for her.

"Another one. She's mine too," Lara announced and hooked an arm around Christie's. Her other arm was already hanging over Raquel's shoulders.

"What is happening?" Rob's sister asked.

"Look at her stocking her girl harem. That is a picture of greed," Rico said, appearing suddenly and pointing at Lara.

Christie looked to Rob for help, but he only shook his head. He wasn't about to attempt to explain any of this to her.

Rico and Mitch got to meet Christie. "There's no escaping now that you're part of Lara's harem," Rico told her then he wondered, "Is everyone's sister in town?"

"You have something against sisters?" Rob asked him.

"Just hers." Rico pointed to Lara. "That hussy tried to steal my man, but my victory was assured." Rico flexed his arms.

"That's just the way she is. Stella is family, and you got your man. She's back there on the phone. No holding grudges. Be nice when you see her," Lara warned him and Rico grumbled.

Julian looked over at Christie then at Rob, wondering how she was taking all this craziness. She seemed amused and eager to sample some food.

"Candy apples in a town called Peach Tree. Smacks of sacrilege," Rico said shaking his head in disapproval as they passed a booth that sold them.

"Caramel apples, candy apples, toffee apples," Raquel counted off.

"Sacrilege, all of them. These people have no decency. This is Peach Tree."

"Rico is mad at the apples," Danny said.

"Rico, look. Apples with candy eyes on them," Sammy said.

"You think we can eat them?" Rico asked distracted from his outrage for the moment.

Sammy was quick with her verdict. "No. They have eyes."

"I see peaches too. They're poached in spiced vinegar," Christie said reading the label.

At the mention of vinegar, all the kids made faces. There were also pitchers of apple cider and something called peach cider.

"It's like drinking a pie," Noreen complained.

"Load me up," Raquel said and ordered some from the vendor.

Julian decided to treat the kids to some drinks, and Rico took the opportunity to question Danny, "What's new, little buddy? What did these guys do last night?"

Danny had a little information for him, "Julian and Rob had lots of fun going to a date."

"Aha. What else?" Rico pressed him.

"Rob said it was the bestest date," Danny said, and Julian shared a smile with Rob.

"What else did Rob say?" Rico asked and eyed Rob wickedly.

Blinking, Danny had to think hard about it. Then he came up with something. "Rob said, 'Hurry and brush your teeth.'"

Everyone laughed at that and Danny looked around, not understanding why.

"So where was this date?" Noreen asked.

"At the Stone Creek Inn," Julian said though he wasn't about to tell them much more than that.

"You reserved one of the private dining rooms, of course," Lara guessed.

"Something like that," Julian said evasively, reaching the limit of what he was willing to share.

"Something like that?" Rico repeated with a look of suspicion. "What did you get up to, you sneaky bastard?"

"Nothing you need to know about," Rob answered for him.

Seeing that the kids were milling around, Rico gave up. "I want all the dirty details later," he demanded in a low voice.

Julian promised him nothing.

Next they met up with Wyatt and Sam who were with two of Wyatt's guy friends from out of town. Yu and Stan became part of another round of introductions.

"I always show up for these festivals, and I always leave disappointed," Stan said. He was the chubby, very casually dressed one.

"He wants a procession of shirtless guys," Yu explained. He was trim

and more stylish. They were a completely mismatched pair.

"Shirtless in this weather?" Rob said.

"That's the only issue you see? The weather?" Sam asked him.

"What?" Rob said with a shrug.

"See why I like him?" Wyatt said and clapped Rob on the back.

"Do you even need us any more?" Yu asked him.

"Of course I do. I love you guys," Wyatt told them.

"You're supposed to be the freshest of the fresh meat, and you two are already paired off. How does this always happen?" Stan asked as he eyed Rob and Julian disapprovingly.

"You're doomed to be disappointed," Yu told him with no sympathy whatsoever.

The whole time, Julian kept a close eye on his phone since he knew Mr. Upton was on his way. While the kids were debating what to do next, Julian got a text from Mr. Upton letting him know that he was over by the cranberry crafts booth. That wasn't very far. Leaving Danny and Rob to have fun with the others, Julian went ahead to meet him. He spotted Mr. Upton easily and that wavy, silver hair of his. He stood out in his expensive but casual outfit more appropriate for a champagne brunch, but he was smiling at what he saw around him.

Julian barely started greeting him, when he saw Mr. Upton's eyes light up and he stood a little straighter. Lara and her group had gotten his attention as they made their way over. All together like that, they were a sight, especially now that Lara's sister had joined them. She was the flashiest one of the group.

"I've heard in a small town like this, everyone knows everyone," Mr. Upton hinted.

Julian indulged him. "I'll introduce you."

"Yes, indeed, this is a lovely little town," Mr. Upton said right after he was introduced to Lara and all the girls she had gathered around her and her sister as well.

Julian saw that he would be making more introductions as the rest of the guys joined him. For now, Mr. Upton was preoccupied with the girls.

"Is that him?" Rico asked. "Look at him strutting his moneybags."

"I want to be that guy, but with a bunch of hot guys around me," Stan said seeing Mr. Upton laughing it up with the girls. "What is he, like a hundred?"

Rico shushed him. "Keep it down. That's Julian's boss."

"Now you're mister decorum," Wyatt said to him and got a glare in return.

Mr. Upton was too busy chatting with the girls to notice the rest of

them. Stella was by far the most receptive to his charms, and the other girls seemed happy to let her monopolize him.

Eventually, Julian did get to introduce everyone else as well. Mr. Upton seemed a little surprised that he was meeting so many people. "To think you used to be downright antisocial," he whispered to Julian.

Rob and Danny were the only ones Mr. Upton still had to meet, but they were with the other kids watching some apple carving. When they all finally came over, Julian started with Rob. "This is my boss, Mr. Upton. This is my boyfriend, Rob Gerric."

Rob looked a little startled at that, and Julian wondered if he was really surprised. It was who he was after all.

Julian was about to introduce Danny and the other kids when out of nowhere he heard a very unpleasant voice behind him. "I guess someone got a promotion," Pete Thayer said with a mean little chuckle.

Julian spun around. He couldn't believe his eyes. What was Thayer doing here? Dismayed and furious, Julian had to contain his reaction while Thayer smirked. Then suddenly, Rob was standing between him and Thayer.

"Yeah, I got a promotion. You here to congratulate me?" Rob asked Thayer, his voice pure menace.

"Who is that guy and why do I want to see Rob mash his face into the dirt?" Rico wondered from right behind Julian.

Seeing how Thayer and Rob eyed each other, Mr. Upton looked between them then sighed. "Pete, you're making friends everywhere you go," Mr. Upton said. He patted Rob on the back lightly to let him know to stand down. Stern-faced and protective, Rob wasn't eager to step aside but he did. "Pete, you did tell me that Brenner knew you were tagging along."

"Oh, I did mean to tell him, but then I got busy," Thayer lied.

Julian stared at him in disbelief while Thayer fixed him with a cadaverous smile. Mr. Upton seemed to know he was lying, but only harrumphed in response.

Danny came to stand close to Julian and grabbed hold of his hand. With an unhappy expression, he stared fixedly at Thayer.

"And who's this young man?" Mr. Upton asked, smiling down at Danny.

Right now, Danny wasn't paying any attention to Mr. Upton. He was furrowing his brow at Thayer and refusing to take his eyes off him. Rob stood as if to shield both Julian and Danny. He wore a dangerous look while his sister looked worried for him. Upton didn't fail to notice their reactions and how the mood had turned sour.

Thayer was acting like nothing was wrong and he and Julian were

just going to chitchat, like any two colleagues who happened to run into each other. "I just couldn't resist a small town festival. Had to find out what was keeping Brenner here when there's work to be done back at the office," Thayer said.

"Now, now, Pete. Julian more than pulls his weight," Mr. Upton told him. "Why don't you go buy some souvenirs for your lovely wife."

Thayer didn't like being dismissed, but he had no choice but to leave. He shot Rob a venomous look, saying, "Nice to see you again." Then he pointed his fake smile all around and sauntered away. Soon he disappeared into the crowd, and Julian breathed a sigh of relief.

"That boy is a killjoy," Mr. Upton said. He turned his attention back to Stella, and she positively beamed at him. He offered her his arm, and they walked on together.

Julian was so glad Thayer was gone otherwise he would have to put on a mask and pretend to have a polite conversation with him in front of Mr. Upton and everyone else. As they all continued to explore the festival together, Julian couldn't help glancing around for Thayer, and he caught Rob doing the same thing, but there was no sign of him.

"I swear that was like you were in high school all over again," Christie said while glaring at her brother.

"Who was the creep?" Lara asked.

"Yeah. I noticed we didn't get introduced to him, and for the record, I'm fine with that," Stan said.

"I wanted to mace him," Raquel said and everyone gaped at her.

"And you're supposed to be the nice one," Rico said but she just shrugged.

"That was my boss, for now," Julian told them.

"Yuck. Quit. Quit right now," Rico ordered him.

"Wow, Thayer makes a good first impression," Rob said.

"Narrow face, thin lips, no chin or charm to speak of," Yu listed. "What's not to like?"

"You're so shallow," Raquel told him.

"Says the girl who wanted to mace him," Stan reminded her.

"Let's forget about him. We need to find a good spot to watch the parade," Sam reminded them. He was always the sensible one.

As they staked out a good corner, all the kids got hoisted up for a better view. Rob leaned down to talk to Danny. "You want to be up high too?" he asked.

Seeing all the other kids sitting on grown-ups' shoulders, Danny nodded. "Me too," he said.

Rob put him up on his shoulders, and Danny immediately hugged his head. "Don't cover my eyes or I won't be able to see the parade," Rob said with a laugh. Danny loosened his hold only a little.

"Don't worry, Rob won't let you fall," Julian told him and smiled at Rob.

Not long after that, the parade started. At the head of it was a float with a giant, colorful turkey followed by a marching band. That started the crowds cheering and waving. Then it was floats piled with arrangements of giant fall fruits and vegetables and some other foods too. A group of older kids waved giant cardboard leaves in different colors and did dance moves in synchronized formations. They were followed by a procession of elderly ladies in elaborate hats, and then a float with a giant chipmunk or maybe squirrel munching on an acorn. That got the crowd cheering loudly again.

In the midst of it all, Julian felt a sharp tug on his arm and then saw Thayer grinning at him, beckoning him. Rather than make a scene, Julian decided to step away. That's how Thayer always got him. Rob might not hesitate to get in his face, but Julian felt bound to keep things low key and outwardly civilized.

"I guess I just keep surprising you today," Thayer said smugly. "When I heard that the old man was paying you a visit, I thought I might pay you a little visit too. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"You really shouldn't be here. It's not your kind of place," Julian told him coldly.

"You don't tell me what to do. You still work under me," Thayer said eyeing him lewdly and giving his biceps a squeeze. He tried to pull Julian closer.

Julian jerked away from him, and in the same second, a punch landed Thayer flat on the ground.

Looking to his right, Julian saw Rob pull back his arm and shake out his hand as he stood over Thayer, glaring down at him. Stunned, Julian cursed under his breath. With a quick look around, he confirmed that only a few people saw that. He got down next to Thayer. Rob tried to pull him away from him, but Julian shook him off.

With Rob looming over him protectively, Julian leaned closer to warn Thayer, "You say a word about this, and I'll bury you under so many charges..."

Thayer didn't even let him finish his threat. "That was assault. Your boy toy is going to jail."

"What's this now?" Mr. Upton said suddenly appearing behind them with Stella at his side.

"That thug assaulted me," Thayer said pointing an accusing finger at Rob who stood by impassively, like he was fully prepared to be arrested and it didn't faze him.

Then Stella spoke up. "Not really. They got into a scuffle, that's all.

Julian's boyfriend just got the better of him," Stella claimed while hanging on Mr. Upton's arm like she planned to make that her permanent position.

"Boys will be boys," Mr. Upton told her with a wink. Julian was pretty sure he was only going along with her lie.

Seeing how Mr. Upton was looking at her, Thayer knew better than to contradict Stella. Done playing the victim, he got up and brushed himself off.

"I'm sure we can settle this amicably. Can't we, Pete, my boy?" Mr. Upton said to him. On the surface, he was kindly, but there was a hard edge to his words, and Thayer didn't dare to defy him.

"Of course. This was all a misunderstanding. My friendly visit was misconstrued," Thayer said and stared daggers at both Rob and Julian.

Julian realized he was holding his breath. Did they just get very lucky? Looking over at Rob, Julian saw that he was still coldly furious under a mask of calm.

"Let's go join the others," Julian said to him and took his arm.

Rob came along, but first he glared at Thayer and nodded his thanks to Stella. She and Mr. Upton stayed behind to see Thayer off.

As they walked away, Julian let his hand slide down Rob's arm so he could take his hand.

"You doing OK?" Rob asked him while giving his hand a firm squeeze.

"I just want to see Danny, make sure he isn't scared," Julian told him.

They made their way through the crowd that was still cheering the parade. "Over there! Rob is over there with Danny's big brother!" a little girl's voice was saying. It was Sammy. Following her voice, they found their friends waiting anxiously for them.

"Oh good, we were just coming to find you," Lara said.

"Mean man, mean man," Danny was repeating in such a low voice.

Julian could barely hear him.

"He is gone, honey," Julian told him and got down to hug his little brother. "Everything is OK."

Rob got down on one knee in front of Danny and told him, "The mean man is gone."

"Rob made him go away," Julian added.

Danny looked from him to Rob. "Don't worry. I won't let anything bad happen to Julian or to you," Rob assured him and Danny threw himself at them and tried to hug them both at the same time with his little arms.

"You're missing it," Riley said, jumping impatiently and pointing toward the parade. The last of it was still going by, and they couldn't let the kids miss out. The crowd had thinned out, so they let the kids

stand on the curb and wave at the last of the floats. Wyatt's friends were watching over them and that gave Rob and Julian a chance to talk to everyone else. First they got to hear how they knew something was wrong.

"Rob told us to take Danny. I wasn't sure what was going on," Christie said to Julian. "But Danny was so upset."

"Danny spotted the 'mean, office man'. That's why I had to go,'" Rob told them.

"The kids were up high so they could see what was going on. They passed the word," Noreen explained.

"The children's spy network strikes again," Rico said.

"Gloria told me that the mean man was bothering Mr. Julian. So I got Stella on it," Lara said. "She took Mr. Upton to sort it out."

"Stella?" Rico said.

"She saved the day," Rob told him.

"Stella?" Rico asked again, refusing to believe it.

Julian nodded to confirm it, but Rico just kept shaking his head.

"Don't be like that," Lara told him. "My sister isn't evil incarnate. Not all the time."

"How did she save the day?" Sam asked.

"I punched that guy, but she said it was just a scuffle," Rob said.

That got Rico's approval. "Man, you take being protective to a whole other level. I bet you were ready to rip that guy's spine out and beat him with it."

Noreen didn't feel the same though. "What were you thinking, Rob. You could have been arrested, you know," she scolded him, but then Rob's sister cut in.

"Um, excuse me," Christie said to her then she started in on Rob. "What the hell were you thinking? You're worse than in high school."

Rob just shushed her and pointed toward Danny. Surrounded by all the other children, he did glance back at them all the time, but he couldn't hear them.

"That guy isn't the first creep to get decked at one of these things," Wyatt told them. "It's practically a tradition. But last time it was Sam throwing punches." He grinned at Sam with shameless pride.

Julian and Rob gaped at Sam in disbelief, but the rest seemed to already know about it. Sam glared at Wyatt then turned to Julian. "You OK?"

"I'm fine as long as Danny and Rob are fine."

"You're just being stoic?" Rico accused him and peered at Julian too closely.

"Don't crowd him," Rob told him.

"Right. That's your job," Rico said and pushed Rob at Julian.

The others went to join the kids and gave Rob and Julian a moment alone.

Rob was somber as he started to apologize. "Sorry. I flew off the handle back there, but seeing him put his hand on you, I..."

"You shouldn't have risked getting arrested," Julian told him, but he smiled too.

"So you're not mad at me for punching him? You only ever get fired up for the sake of other people, don't you?" Rob said.

"What do you mean?"

"The way you stepped in to protect me," Rob said.

"No, that's what you did. But I can handle myself pretty well as long as I don't have to worry about anyone else getting hurt," Julian admitted.

"Don't ask me to promise to stay out of it if I ever see that you're in trouble," Rob said.

"I know I can count on you," Julian told him.

"And I feel the same way." They kissed briefly, but Danny was looking back anxiously so they went over to him.

Mr. Upton was there too, handing out chocolate covered mini apples to all the kids. The festival was winding down and they were all making plans to go home before meeting up again at Mrs. Del Rio's. Mr. Upton was about to leave for his own family Thanksgiving.

"My apologies about Pete. That's no way for one of my executives to behave," Mr. Upton said to Julian. "One of these days I might need to fill his position. I'd be happy to consider you for the job."

Julian wasn't tempted by his offer. "I'm grateful but..."

"You want to stay here, don't you?" Mr. Upton guessed before Julian could finish.

"I do," Julian said with a glance toward Rob and Danny next to a display of pies. Raquel was buying a stack of them to take home with her, and Stan and Yu were calling her "pie crazy". The three of them were getting ready to leave too, and the others were busy saying goodbye to them.

"I don't blame you," Mr. Upton said and smiled wistfully. "If I had moved to a place like this maybe I wouldn't be on my second heart attack now. I don't know how you fell in with such a spirited bunch, but they'll be good for you."

Some of the others came over to say goodbye to Mr. Upton too, but Rob stayed back with Danny and the other kids. Maybe because Thayer showed up at the same time, Danny didn't warm up to Mr. Upton at all.

About to part company with them, Mr. Upton told Julian. "It was a very enjoyable day, except for that one hiccup." His eyes lingered on

Rob for a moment. "I think our tastes run along the same lines, my boy."

Julian didn't know what he was talking about.

"You don't see it?" Mr. Upton said. "Your young man there is like the male version of young Stella."

Now everyone was looking back and forth between Rob and Stella, who was a few steps away, busy on her phone. Julian didn't bother comparing them, but when Mr. Upton stepped away, Rico was there squinted in Rob's direction. "I knew there was a reason I didn't like him."

"You are both insane," Julian told him while they watched Mr. Upton say his goodbyes to Stella. He was trying to tempt Stella to go with him to his Thanksgiving dinner. He didn't win out, but it looked like they were exchanging phone numbers.

"I thought she was into young and studly," Rico said and patted his fiancé's chest.

"Money well turn anyone into a stud," Lara said with a shrug.

As they looked on, Stella sent off Mr. Upton with a wave and a dazzling smile. After Mr. Upton was gone, Rico was still eyeing Stella suspiciously.

"We're leaving. Don't start anything," Sam warned him and went to join Wyatt and the boys.

That didn't stop Rico. As Julian went with Lara to thank Stella for her help, Rico was right there. Julian was barely done when Rico stepped up to have his say.

"I know you tried to steal Mitch away from me, but since you didn't get anywhere, and you helped out with that slimeball, all is forgiven," Rico declared haughtily.

"Excuse me?" Stella said, looking appalled.

Rico threw an arm over Julian's shoulder and elaborated. "You came to the aid of my buddy here and his boyfriend, so I forgive you."

Stella glared at him then turned to her sister. "The ego on this brat. Are we going now?" she asked and stalked away.

"Thanks for everything," Rico called out after her.

"Is there anyone you can't antagonize?" Rob asked him as he came over with Sammy and Mitch.

"Nope," Rico said easily and took Sammy's hand. "Did you leave any room in your tummy for Grandma's turkey?"

"A little room," she said.

"We'll see you later," Mitch told them as he took Sammy's other hand.

"See you guys at the turkey riot," Rico told them as they went off.

"We better get going too," Rob said as he put his arm around Julian. "But I have to warn you, it looks like Christie is trying to buy Danny the biggest caramel apple I ever saw."

"That's too much," Julian said seeing for himself that he wasn't kidding.

"He'll be working on that thing for days," Rob predicted.

When they went closer, Danny spotted them and panicked. He tried to hide the giant apple, which was wrapped in cellophane and tied with ribbon. "Oh, no. They're here," he said in alarm.

"Don't worry. They don't know anything. You can still surprise them," Christie assured him. "Right guys?"

They agree with that, then Christie encouraged Danny to go ahead.

"It's for you and Rob," Danny said and he gave them the apple. "Because you're boyfriends."

"You're supposed to share it," Christie said and Danny nodded.

"Boyfriends share things," Danny told them.

"That's what I told him when he asked me what boyfriends do," Christie said and raised an eyebrow at both of them.

"That was a good answer," Julian told her then he leaned down to kiss the top of Danny's head. "Thank you. This is a very nice surprise." He was so touched, and judging by the soft and loving look in his eyes, Rob was too.

"Thank you," Rob said and he hugged Danny. "Want to ride on my shoulders back to the car?"

After looking up at Rob and thinking about it for a bit, Danny agreed. He was still a little scared so he held on too tight, but eventually he settled in. With his chin on top of Rob's head and his arms wrapped around his neck, he looked all around. Julian rubbed his back and wondered if they could get him to take a nap. After all Thanksgiving wasn't over yet.

Chapter 27

Back at the house, Julian was checking on a few things for work before they headed to Mrs. Del Rio's. They were going to a house full of people, and Rob wished he could spend more time with him alone to make sure he was really OK. Too bad Rob couldn't drag him away from his office.

While Julian was busy, Rob and Christie went along with Danny so Lenny could have his walk. The dog groomer had put a new bow in Lenny's hair, which he was likely to lose by the end of the day, so Rob made sure to take pictures. That reminded him to take some selfies with Christie too. Running ahead of them with Lenny, Danny was happy that he would get to bring his little buddy to Thanksgiving dinner.

It was going to be a good Thanksgiving. Even that jerk Thayer couldn't spoil this day, but Christie wasn't going to let Rob forget about what went down any time soon. "I can't believe you, Rob. And I thought small towns were supposed to be peaceful."

"It's all good," Rob told her, but inside, he was still pissed. For that guy to come all the way here to harass Julian... Rob wanted to kick the crap out of him, and he admired Julian for staying so calm, at least on the surface. Rob could only imagine how much self-control it took not to lash out at Thayer.

Going to Mrs. Del Rio's for Thanksgiving dinner was going to be a good diversion from all that. Once Julian came out to tell them he was ready, they could get on their way.

Outside Mrs. Del Rio's gate, dozens of cars turned the side of the road into a parking lot. At least they had a nice walk up the path to her front door. Mrs. Del Rio's garden was a riot of fall colors with orange and yellow lights strung up everywhere.

There was even more going on inside the house. Wreaths and boughs with leaves and berries in every color decorated the doorways. The place was lit up and guests were milling around with drinks in hand.

Seeing all the Thanksgiving decorations plus Mrs. Del Rio's flashy decorating style, Danny couldn't get enough as he kept pointing out things to Lenny. Of course Lenny was in his sniff everything mode.

"There is our hostess. Let's go say hello and thank her for having us," Julian said, addressing Danny.

They introduced Christie to her and Mrs. Del Rio greeted her warmly. "Of course Rob would have a pretty sister," Mrs. Del Rio said to her.

She was barely done complementing Christie before Lara swooped in

and whisked her away. "Thanks for bringing her," Lara said, like Christie was there purely for her benefit.

Now Mrs. Del Rio turned her attention to Danny. "Look at this precious boy and this precious doggy. You ready to stuff your little faces?"

"Lenny can have Thanksgiving too," Danny said to her.

"He is such a good doggy, of course he can," Mrs. Del Rio said and she got down to show Lenny some love.

While they were greeting Mrs. Del Rio, Wyatt texted them to bring Danny and Lenny out back. That's where the kids and the dogs were playing in the leaves, under orange and yellow lanterns. Sam and Wyatt were out there with them, getting in on the fun.

As soon as they stepped out, Danny started bouncing on the back porch. He couldn't wait to go and play with the other kids, but first he looked up at Julian and Rob to see if it was OK. With their permission, he and Lenny were off. There was giggling and kicking up leaves, and Danny ran over and threw a handful of leaves up in the air.

Now it was just Julian and Rob on the porch and whoever chose to accost them. Bringing them some beers, Rico and Mitch came out there too.

"It certainly is festive here," Julian said to them with a smile.

"If her shindig doesn't give the festival a run for its money, Grandma isn't happy," Rico said then he wheeled on Julian. "And you! Why wasn't I the first to hear about this boyfriend thing?"

"The first?" Rob said. Actually Rob had found out about his official status as a boyfriend at the same time Rico did, but he wasn't about to tell him that.

"I promise to keep you apprised of any future developments in a timely and expeditious manner," Julian told Rico in a very businesslike way.

That only made Rico madder. "You are in so much trouble."

"Be good," Mitch told him. "Didn't you want your parents to see how serious and mature you are?"

"Ugh parents. Do you know what kind of pressure I'm under?" Rico complained to Julian and Rob.

Julian tried to match him. "Rob's sister is here."

Rico shook his head. "You can't compare a sister to parents."

"She and Rob are very close, and she disapproves of him taking this job and staying here," Julian told him.

Rob didn't realize he knew that. "Did she say something?"

Before Julian could answer, Rico jumped in with his own question. "How can she not approve of you? She should be glad Rob got his hands all over you." Rico mimed grabby hands.

"Is it going well with your parents?" Julian asked to divert him.

Rico went along with it. "Do you know what my dad said when he saw our place? 'I never thought I would see you living in a proper house like this.' If I would only go back to 'real' college, I would make all his fatherly dreams come true."

"Are you saying it's going well or it isn't? I can't tell," Rob told him.

"Not too bad, I guess." Rico still sounded like he was complaining. "Mom and Dad are both in love with Mitch, and Sammy is their new treasure. They try to buy her everything in sight. It could be worse I guess," Rico said with a shrug then he focused on Julian. "And don't you worry. Christie is going to love you."

Rob didn't think Julian needed the encouragement, but maybe he did. Rob was used to the way Christie was. But in Julian's life, family disapproval didn't come from well-meaning big sisters. It was unrelenting and cruel.

That's why Rob put his arm around Julian and told him, "She already likes you. She helped Danny buy us the boyfriend apple, didn't she?"

That made Rico want to question them, but Mitch changed the subject to all the work that needed to be done to clean up after the festival. "I'll get ready to roll up my sleeves again," Rob said.

Most of the party guests were inside where it was warm and booze was flowing, but the kids were happy to run around the yard. The guys didn't mind keeping them company until Mrs. Del Rio announced that dinner was being served. At first it took real work to get the kids to come in and eat, but then they were racing each other inside.

As they were being seated at two long dining tables, Rico introduced Rob and Julian to his parents. Neither his mother or father seemed like the kind of people who could be responsible for producing a son like Rico. Both of them were pleasant and perfectly normal.

The long tables were set up with impressive Thanksgiving centerpieces and loaded down with food. There was a separate table for the kids nearby. The guests had only just started eating when Julian got an alert.

"That's my car alarm. I'll go see what's going on," Julian said and got up from the table. Now that he said that, Rob could hear it faintly from way back where they were parked.

"Some critter probably jumped on it," Mrs. Del Rio predicted.

With Julian gone, Rob looked to see how Danny was doing. He had Lenny by his side, and Mitch was over there making sure the kids' plates were full. Wyatt was over there too, taking pictures of the kids as they tackled their food.

Now that he didn't have Julian to hold his full attention, Rob started to listen to the conversations around him.

"Grandma and her boyfriend, the judge, are off on a wine guzzling

tour, and they leave tonight," Rico was saying. "Mitch and I are helping my mom and dad straighten this place out."

"Wyatt and I can stay and help," Sam told him.

"You're volunteering your man. That is such a married thing to do," Rico said with a shake of his head.

"You'll get to do married things too one of these days," Sam said to him.

"Right. One of these days," Rico said.

"If Mitch doesn't change his mind," Rob needled him.

At that Rico's brow furrowed and he looked down at his plate. Was he taking him seriously?

Trying to figure that out, Rob was leaning over for a better look when Sam called his name sharply. "Rob. You know I like you. Let's keep it that way," Sam hissed at him.

"I was just messing around," Rob said to both of them but Rico was still brooding. "Mitch loves you. I know because I asked him to make sure. For some reason he does. He really does."

"Let me do the pep talk," Sam told him then he took Rico by the shoulders and shook him. "Snap out of it. Mitch won't change his mind. He just wants to be able to pay for his own wedding."

"OK, OK," Rico said so Sam would stop shaking him. "I trust Mitch. I believe in him with my whole heart and soul. I just get spooked sometimes."

"Weddings do that to people," Sam said and winked at him.

Rico now looked at Mitch over by the kids' table. He and Wyatt were embroiled in a debate with the kids about how many green beans each of them had to eat. This involved some kind of special kid math so the guys didn't stand a chance.

"There are easier guys to be married to than me," Rico said while gazing at Mitch with pained longing. Rico put up a good front, but even he had self-doubts.

"Mitch has already proved he's not into easy," Sam told him.

"You talking about Lara's sister?" Rico asked him archly.

Sam grinned at him. "There you go. That's my Rico."

"I just love Mitch so much. He's incredible," Rico said and he actually had a sweet smile on his face.

"You're incredible too," Sam told him. "And Mitch knows it. That's why he wants to marry you."

"I'm going to be the best husband," Rico vowed, getting some of his usual overconfidence back. "I'll show him he made the best decision of his life."

"I guess you're all better," Rob said.

"I just love Mitch so much, it drives me crazy," Rico said.

"Even I can see how much you guys love each other," Rob told him.

"But I am sorry for what I said. I was just yanking your chain."

Rob was in the middle of apologizing when he started to think that Julian had been gone a little too long. Rico's drama had distracted him, but now he was worried. He texted Julian, but didn't wait for a reply. He turned to the guys. "Keep an eye on Danny for me. I want to see what's keeping Julian."

As he got up from the table and sent another text, he shot Danny a reassuring smile and made sure not to let on that he was worried. The last thing he wanted was to upset Danny.

That's why he walked to the door slowly, but once he was out of sight, he was off like a shot. It was probably all for nothing. Julian was fine. It didn't mean anything that he didn't reply to his texts. That's what he told himself as he ran and, at the same time, tried to push down the feeling of dread that was rising inside him.

Chapter 28

It happened right as Julian turned off the car alarm, like that was the thing his attacker was waiting for. Julian felt an arm go around his neck, choking him. It was cutting off his air, but he couldn't let himself pass out, couldn't let himself panic at the coming darkness.

Finding just enough room, he elbowed the man. He didn't feel a solid connection. He tried again but only felt the arm at his throat tighten. This was it. Feeling his legs growing weak, Julian shifted all his weight onto the man, unbalanced him and shoved him away.

With the choking grip gone, Julian staggered. Only a few feet from his attacker, Julian saw a flash of metal held in the man's gloved hand. The man took one step.

"Thayer! I know that's you!" Julian called, his voice hoarse from the chokehold but loud in the quiet of the night.

That made him stop. His attacker wore a windbreaker and an oversized flannel shirt over a hoodie that was pulled low over his eyes. Even in darkness, the clothes looked brand new as did the sneakers he wore. Covering his face was a black, knit cap with eyeholes roughly cut out.

Julian knew who had to be behind the disguise. The extra layers filled out his skeletal frame, but without a doubt, that was Pete Thayer.

The sound of his name spoken so loudly made Thayer hesitate and he looked around furtively. As he did that, Julian backed up, trying to put some distance between them. But with the way the cars were parked on the side of the road, he didn't have much room to maneuver.

"And I was trying to do this the easy way," a familiar voice said, and Julian knew he was right.

"You're going to jail for this," Julian told him. Unfortunately he had dropped his key fob in the scuffle and couldn't press the panic button. And he didn't dare reach for his phone when Thayer held a knife.

"You just had to make this hard for yourself," Thayer hissed, grinding his teeth in frustration. It was clear he was rattled by being recognized, but he wasn't ready to give up. "You and me are going to spend some quality time together. It's way overdue."

"You are delusional. Your life as a free man and your career are finished," Julian told him, trying to make him snap out of this insanity, cut his losses and leave.

It wasn't working. Thayer just kept ranting like he was trying to work himself up to doing something drastic. "Upton suggested I explore new opportunities, that there might be jobs I'm better suited

for. That bullshit is all your fault," Thayer said and pointed the knife at Julian. "You and me are going to have some fun, and after I'm done with you, you won't say a word, not unless you want to be a porn star. I'm going to own you."

Julian ignored his words and focused on the knife, wondering when he would decide to use it. For now, Julian was just out of range of that blade, afraid to move and set off an attack. He was boxed in, trapped between two cars and a tangle of dry bushes that would slow him down too much if he tried to run in that direction.

"Let's go, Julian. I don't like playing with damaged goods, but I will cut you," Thayer threatened.

Julian didn't move an inch, just watched that knife and blocked out everything else including his own terror. A loud thump to his right was a shock to him. It was followed by the sight of Rob sliding over the hood of the car parked behind him. Breathless, Rob came to a stop just in front of Julian and stared down Thayer and the knife that was pointed at him now.

"Interesting outfit. And what are you supposed to be?" Rob taunted him, sounding both menacing and unconcerned.

But that knife in Thayer's hand wasn't something to take lightly, and Julian hoped Rob wasn't about to do anything rash. Faced with the two of them, Thayer might finally decide to drop this insanity and just leave.

He wasn't giving up yet though. On seeing Rob, Thayer gnashed his teeth and the gloved hand holding the knife started to shake. The disguise didn't let Julian see if he was shaking in fear or anger or a combination of both.

Breathing hard like he ran here, Rob didn't even have a jacket on. That reminded Julian that he did. Julian shrugged out if his jacket thinking to wrap it around his arm, use it as a shield, but Rob snatched it from him.

In the next instant Rob was charged at Thayer using the jacket to snag the knife in Thayer's hand while he landed a punch to his face. Julian was afraid that Thayer might still be able to use the knife. To keep that from happening, Julian wanted to grab Thayer's arm, but he couldn't get close as the two of them spun around.

Rob had the jacket wrapped around Thayer's hand and wrist but not for long. Watching as Thayer got loose, Julian went for the knife in his hand only to see him toss it away. It disappeared into the darkness, going somewhere into the bushes, and since he was wearing gloves his fingerprints wouldn't be on it.

But now Thayer was fumbling with something else he had in his pocket. No doubt fearing he might have a gun or something else lethal, Rob was on him. Rob landed a punch right to the center of his

chest and knocked the wind out of him.

That's when Julian saw that Thayer had a phone in his hand and he was desperately holding on to it. Was he going to call the police and claim Rob attacked him?

While Julian was trying to figure out what Thayer was up to, Rob didn't hesitate to act. Rob kicked his legs out from under him, but Thayer didn't stay down. On his feet again, he scrambled away.

Instead of just running full out, Thayer was doing something with the phone he had in his hand. Only it looked like the gloves he wore were getting in his way.

Whatever he was doing was slowing him down. Rob caught up to him, tackled him, and slammed him to the ground. As he hit the ground, Thayer lost his grip on the phone.

Rob twisted Thayer's arm behind his back and shoved him down. Wisely, he made sure Thayer's face didn't slam into the ground too hard. Julian wouldn't have minded seeing Thayer get what he deserved, but he didn't want to see Rob get arrested for it.

Thayer's phone was lying a few feet away, and Julian picked it up. It was unlocked, and Julian made sure it stayed that way. But first he got out his own phone to call the sheriff.

Kneeling on Thayer's back, Rob pinned both his arms behind him. "What do you want me to do with him?" Rob asked. "I'm up for anything."

"Just make sure he doesn't run. I'm calling the sheriff."

"He's not going anywhere." Rob ripped the knit cap off, exposing Thayer's face contorted with rage. While Julian spoke on the phone, he cursed nonstop.

"What's going on with his phone?" Rob asked once Julian was done taking to the sheriff's office.

"This isn't his phone. It's cheap," Julian said as he started looking at it again.

"A burner phone?" Rob said.

"I don't know. But it's unlocked. He was trying to delete something." Julian was looking at a dialog asking him to confirm that he wanted to delete a folder.

"That's not mine!" Thayer screamed while Julian clicked cancel and opened the folder.

"What's on there?" Rob asked.

After a long pause Julian gave him the shortest possible answer. "Me."

"You? What do you mean?" Rob asked and he pushed Thayer down angrily.

As Julian stared at the contents of the folder, he went numb inside and his answers came out too slow. He knew he was worrying Rob,

but he couldn't make himself react any faster as the past replayed in front of his eyes. "Video. Photos," Julian finally said.

"He was stalking you? This creep took pictures of you?" Rob said and he twisted Thayer's arms a little more.

Julian shook his head. "These are from years ago, from school. They were taken by his brother and his friends."

"They're not mine!" Thayer yelled. At first Julian didn't understand why he was so desperate to deny it, then Rob made it all clear.

"Are you by any chance underage in those pictures?" Rob asked.

"Very much so," Julian said.

"Like hell! That's a lie. You can't prove it," Thayer screamed.

"I'm pretty sure I can." Julian didn't say anything more as the sound of a police siren reached them. Lights flashed somewhere up the road and then the sheriff's car stopped right beside them.

At the same time, Julian spotted Mitch, Rico and Wyatt making their way toward them. "Everything OK?" Wyatt called out as the sheriff and one of her deputies got out of the car.

"We're fine," Julian told them then he explained things to the sheriff in broad strokes. He also handed over the phone, which she bagged. Now that the deputy and the sheriff were there, Rob got off Thayer and let them take him.

Coming over to Julian, Rico pointed at Thayer. "I did say I wanted to see Rob mash his face into the dirt but...What the hell is going on?"

"That dirtbag came after Julian," Rob said answering Rico, and at the same time letting the sheriff know what happened. "He had a knife. He threw it in the bushes over there."

"It's not mine," Thayer claimed, but in no time, he was cuffed and in the back of the police car.

The sheriff was taking Julian's statement while Rob updated the guys. When it was Rob's turn to give his statement, Julian found himself surrounded.

Rico gave him a tight hug and asked, "Are you really OK?"

At the same time, Wyatt squeezed his shoulder and Mitch patted his back.

"Why did you guys come out here?" Julian wondered.

"Rico told us that Rob rushed out of the house, so we came to check on you two," Mitch explained.

"Sam stayed behind to make sure the kids wouldn't worry. I texted him that you are OK," Wyatt said.

"And you are OK, right?" Rico asked.

"Yes," Julian assured him.

The guys kept him company until Rob came over.

"You're not in any legal jeopardy, right?" Julian asked Rob and placed a hand on his forearm like he needed the physical proof that he

was safe.

"Not as far as I can tell. The sheriff said she'd be in touch, and we're free to go."

"Of course he's not in trouble," Rico chimed in to reassure Julian. "He's your bodyguard. It's his job to beat up guys for you."

As the sheriff's car pulled away, Thayer glared out the window at Julian. Rob put a protective arm around him while his jaw flexed.

"Look at that sack of crap," Rico said, seething.

Mitch put an arm around him and Rico sighed against his shoulder. But he wasn't still for even one second before he got combative.

"I'm going to kill that slimeball," Rico said then he waved in Rob's direction. "I know. I'll get in line behind Rob, but then I'm totally going to kill that guy."

Mitch pulled Rico tighter against him. "Let's go. Everyone will want to see these guys are OK."

"I hope Danny is all right," Julian said as he and Rob walked hand in hand a little bit behind the others.

"We'll be seeing him soon," Rob said but then he glanced behind them. His green eyes flashed with anger in the direction where Thayer was taken. "They better send Thayer away so you don't have to ever worry about him again."

"I think they have some good evidence. When the sheriff searched his car, she found handcuffs and chloroform and something she thinks might be GHB," Julian told him. By the renewed fury in Rob's eyes, Julian could tell he hadn't heard about that. "It's fine. He's in custody."

Despite that reminder, Rob's voice was rough with anger as he spoke. "In his diseased brain, he actually thought he was going to get away with all of it just by double backing here in that lame disguise."

"He was counting on everyone assuming he was long gone. And I think he planned to blackmail me," Julian said remembering how Thayer said he planned to keep him quiet.

"He's a sicko. That guy was obsessed with you. He better not weasel out of this. You sure you can date the video and the pictures?" Rob wondered.

"I am."

They were already walking slowly, falling behind the others and now Julian stopped. He could still see the video playing. The shock on his face as they barged into the bathroom, how he tried to cover himself, screamed at them to get out. Thayer's brother snatched the towel from him and the other guys cackled. Next Alex Thayer could be heard saying, "Check it out. He's gonna lose it."

But he was wrong. In one shot there was a look of terror, but then Julian's expression turned blank, a mask that wouldn't let his

tormentors see what was going on inside him.

Julian knew how to hold in his fear and pain. At home, he learned that if he showed any weakness, there were only worse punishments waiting for him. That's what his grandfather had taught him.

Even now that lesson was making him shut down just like his younger self had done. But he wasn't a scared, bullied kid looking at the hateful, sneering faces of his tormentors. He was an adult looking at his younger self, seeing the buried pain, the wall going up inside him.

Through all that, the details in the background didn't escape him. They were how Julian could date the video.

As he went silent, Rob had started rubbing his back. He didn't press him to talk or explain anything, but Julian did anyway. "That was the video from when Thayer's brother and some other guys ambushed me in the shower. The school did some renovations to the dorms. Among other things, they replaced the very distinctive black and white tiles in the bathrooms. But there are other things too." Julian was sure there would be records to prove when the renovations were done. "They did the renovations over the summer break when I turned fifteen. That means I'm still fourteen in the video and the pictures."

"I'm pretty sure I'll kill Thayer if I see him again," Rob said through gritted teeth.

Julian threw his arms around him and whispered in his ear. "That's all over, and it's Thanksgiving."

"Fine. I'm grateful you're OK," Rob said grudgingly and gave him a long, loving kiss that soothed him better than anything else could.

Julian wanted to stay in that embrace, keep kissing Rob with his eyes closed, shutting everything else out. But they were practically on Mrs. Del Rio's doorstep and the others were waiting.

"They're throwing down a challenge. Let's get busy," Rico said to Mitch and hooked an arm around his fiancé's neck.

"Break it up. People are waiting," Wyatt said impatiently.

"You mean Sam," Rico accused him. Pushing past Wyatt, he opened the front door and loudly announced their return.

Going inside, they found that their friends were all away from the table, waiting for them in the front room. The kids and the dogs were all clustered together right in front. When they saw them walk in, they set off a racket and then all ran over together.

Danny was front and center, holding Lenny and looking up at them with worried eyes. Rob scooped up the little boy and the little dog and then Julian wrapped his arms around them too. He reassured Danny, "Everything is all right."

"There was some stuff going on, but everything is OK now," Rob told

Danny and the other kids too. He then looked sternly at all the kids then finally at Danny. "And what happened to dinner?"

"Danny got scared because you were gone," Sammy told him and then all the other kids chimed in to confirm it.

"Does that mean you didn't finish your dinner?" Rob asked Danny like their Thanksgiving meal was the most important thing in the world, and whatever happened out there was nothing. It seemed to work to make Danny forget why he was so worried. His only worry now was that Rob might scold him for not eating his dinner.

Danny shook his head. "We didn't finish," he admitted.

"Then we better get back to eating, huh," Rob told him, and they got the group of kids back to their table.

Rico went to keep the kids busy. To distract them, the first thing he did was try to serve them more green beans. That had the kids in an uproar. Sammy set off a chorus of "too many" and "no fair".

"Rico, kids have little stomachs. We need room for pie," Gloria argued reasonably.

With Rico stirring up trouble at the kids' table, Rob and Julian were free to talk to Christie, Sam, Mrs. Del Rio and the others who all wanted to see for themselves that they were really all right.

"I told you the festivals are cursed," Sam said once he heard about the attack.

"Nothing is cursed. Everyone is fine," Wyatt assured him and kissed his face.

"What's this about a curse?" Christie asked.

"There's always some crazy crisis whenever we have a festival," Noreen told her. "But I thought we got that out of the way earlier."

"The important thing is that things turned out OK," Wyatt said, like he didn't want to dwell on it for Sam's sake.

"All's well that ends well. Now let's feed you boys," Mrs. Del Rio said and they were all seated again.

Most of them went back to enjoying their food, but Julian didn't have an appetite. He only ate to show everyone he was all right, especially Rob, and also to set a good example for Danny who kept peering in their direction.

When he was sure Thayer would use that knife on him, Julian thought of Danny and Rob. For them, he had to come through it in one piece. But now he saw that everyone was relieved they were all right. They all cared. That was something he never experienced before – friends to take his side, to worry, to pile his plate with more food than he could possibly eat.

Julian felt Rob take his hand and he smiled. This had the makings of being a horrible, terrifying night, but all Julian could feel was warmth

and love and a strong, firm hold on his hand as Rob brought it to his lips for a kiss.

Chapter 29

Dinner was over and Mrs. Del Rio had them gather in a large sitting room for drinks, pie and all sorts of other goodies. The kids were running around and the mood was as festive as it should be at a big Thanksgiving dinner party.

After what happened, Rob only wanted to stick close to Julian, never leave his side. But he could tell that Christie was getting ready to put him in a headlock if he didn't give her a few minutes of his time so she could chew him out.

Rob kissed Julian on the cheek then went off with her to a quiet spot to talk.

"I still don't understand what happened. That guy you decked came back. It's all so crazy." Christie wore a disapproving frown, but Rob knew she always worried if he found himself mixed up in any kind of trouble.

"He set off his car alarm to lure Julian out there, and it looks like he planned to kidnap him." The more Rob thought about what Thayer meant to do, the more furious he got and Christie could tell.

"It's over. Take it easy now," she told him.

"He should be grateful I didn't kill him," Rob growled.

"Stop that and act civilized."

"He attacked Julian," Rob told her. That simple fact was enough for him to want to end that guy.

"You really are insanely protective of Julian," Christie said, shaking her head at him. "And not just you. Rico was all, 'Hey, girlie. Lay off my buddy, Jules.' And something about Noreen being spoken for."

"Rico," Rob grumbled. "I'll deal with him later, but I kind of agree. Lay off Julian."

"I have nothing against him, but I admit I wasn't happy he brought you here. Before I came to visit, I thought this place would be stifling. That you'd be lonely here. I had this idea to come over here to kick your ass and drag you back home, but I guess I don't need to," she said with a sheepish smile and Rob scoffed.

"You mean you can't," he told her defiantly.

She sighed. "I know you just want to live your life. Finally. That's what I want for you too."

"I guess then you approve of me staying here," Rob said and nudged her with his elbow.

She wasn't willing to go that far. "I didn't say that. I would miss you too much."

"I'll miss you too, but you can come and visit. From what I hear, they have one of these festivals every other week or something," Rob told

her.

"I could probably be tempted to come over and stuff my face. And there are some pretty great people here," she said and craned her neck to look over his shoulder at everyone.

"I noticed that," Rob said and smiled in Julian's direction.

"I don't mean just Julian. Other people exist, you know," Christie said.

"He's all I see," Rob told her and he probably wore a goofy smile. He couldn't help it.

She sighed then smiled. "I didn't even know you had this side to you. Just be happy, OK."

"I will," Rob told her and gave her a hug.

"So confident. Damn, Rob. You're going to make your sister cry," she said and pushed him off.

"You're the best sister," Rob told her. He was glad they got to talk. But now he was wondered how long he would have to wait to get some time with Julian.

Rob didn't get to be alone with him until they went home and Danny was in bed. As soon as the door to Julian's bedroom was closed behind them, they flew into each other's arms. Now that Julian was finally in his arms, Rob held him tight, tighter than he meant to, but he couldn't help it.

"I'm so glad you're OK," Julian said, surprising Rob by saying what he was thinking.

"You're OK. That's all that matters to me," Rob told him and stroked his dark hair.

"I don't know what would have happened if you didn't show up." Julian drew back and frowned at him. "But you were reckless."

"Was I? And what were you getting ready to do when you started taking off your jacket?" Rob asked him.

"The one you took from me?" Julian said accusingly, but that didn't stop Rob's questioning.

"Were you going to rush him?" Rob asked him straight out, and he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"I wasn't going to let you get hurt," Julian said, as much as admitting that he was right.

"I don't want you getting hurt either. Don't you take any crazy risks," Rob told him, his words coming out as an order.

"Look who's talking," Julian shot back.

There might have been more he wanted to say, but in that moment, Rob realized he didn't want to fight with him. He touched Julian's hair gently. "You were incredible, you know. You stayed so calm," Rob said just as Julian collapsed against him. Rob could hear him grit his teeth

and feel him shiver in his arms.

"That fucking bastard," Julian rasped into his shoulder, his voice harsh and angry.

"It's OK now," Rob told him. "Don't hold back what you feel. You can lean on me, you know."

"I'm not sure I know how," Julian admitted. "But I'm learning."

As Julian raised his face to him for a kiss, Rob could see so much trust written in his beautiful eyes. He was lost in them. Those deep brown eyes could swallow him up, and Rob wanted to kiss his mouth forever. But first he let his fingertips smooth Julian's brow then trail down to stroke through his beard. In the next instant, Rob's lips were against his and Julian's beard tickled his chin. Rob kissed him softly at first then he let the kiss deepen, become rough with need.

Bodies pressed together, arms locked around each other, they kissed, and Rob couldn't get close enough to Julian. His whole body wanted to melt into Julian's.

"Your heart is beating like crazy," Julian noticed.

"Is it? I can't feel it," Rob breathed, barely hearing his own voice.

"I can. It's beating like a drum," Julian told him, stroking his chest through his shirt.

"You did that. It's because of you." Rob's lips brushed his earlobe as he spoke Julian's name in his ear.

Julian's hand was slowly sliding under his shirt and over his naked chest. Rob moved to unbutton Julian's shirt, but his hands ended up twisting with his shirt in his grip, wanting to tear it off him. Rob restrained himself for now and worked the buttons open.

When Julian started grinding against him, Rob started groping his ass. Grasping for him, Rob was desperate to press himself to Julian harder and feel his body shudder for him.

Desire roared through him, an irresistible force that couldn't be ignored. He pushed Julian back toward his bed and stripped him hurriedly. Flushed with so much desire, Rob couldn't contain it. He had to kiss and touch Julian everywhere, spread him out naked on that big bed.

His body thoroughly kissed and licked, Julian was shivering, his skin burning hot. As he watched Rob get ready to finger him, he whimpered. Rob worked his hole until Julian threatened to come.

Soon he had Julian moaning his name and arching off the bed as he fucked him. Rob drove himself inside him, loving him, needing to be as close to him as two bodies could get.

Then they were both moaning and coming together. Gasping his name, Julian was so beautiful and so spent. The sheen of sweat looked so good on him. Resting on top of him, Rob wiped the sweat off his brow and then kissed him deeply, wanting to drink him in.

Hair tussled, moving lazily, sighing and reaching for him, Julian was an irresistible sight. Rob wrapped himself around him and heard him say, "I love you, Rob." His eyes were half closed, his voice only a whisper and a sleepy, satisfied smile played on his lips.

"I love you too," Rob whispered back and felt Julian let out a sound between a moan and a sigh right before he fell asleep.

Chapter 30

Julian woke to Rob's blond head resting on his shoulder, his breath soft against his neck. How did he ever fall asleep last night after what happened. Julian couldn't believe it, but he knew it was thanks to Rob.

As Rob stirred, his sleepy, green eyes looked into Julian's, and he found himself thinking that this was heaven. Then Rob mumbled, "God, you're beautiful." And Julian felt like he had stolen the words from his lips.

Julian turned toward him and touched his mouth to Rob's like he wanted to steal those words back with a kiss.

Pulling back a little, Rob raised himself up on one elbow and stared down at him. Tenderly, his fingers stroked Julian's face. Julian felt himself smiling stupidly, but his touch felt so nice, so right.

Next Rob leaned in and brushed his lips over his cheek. The soft kisses made Julian sigh until Rob's mouth stopped to hover inches from his. One breath, two, and Rob's mouth was melding with his, lips gliding, tongue stroking. This was heaven too. Julian was flying. But then the kiss slowed and Rob pulled back to stare at him again.

Capturing Julian's hands, Rob held them tight against his chest as he told him, "Just now, I wasn't sure that I wasn't dreaming. I still can't believe you're real. I thought living was hanging on, surviving, not opening my arms and my heart to somebody and being happy. And now here I am with you."

"I think I was like that too. I didn't think anything like this was waiting for me, or anyone like you," Julian said as he gazed at him with a beaming smile on his face.

Their languid morning in bed didn't last. Once they got up, Christie helped Rob with breakfast, and Julian took a cup of coffee with him so he could attend to a few things at the office. When he got back to the kitchen, Julian overheard Danny warning Rob.

"Be careful, Rob. Don't put your feets in the doggy water," Danny told him though he wasn't anywhere near the dog dish.

"Feets? OK. I'll be careful," Rob told him.

"Julian put his foot in the doggy water," Danny said. Seeing him approach, he pouted at Julian disapprovingly. "He spilled it."

"And I was duly punished with a wet sock," Julian said, but Danny continued to pout at him. Julian finally had to promise, "I'll be more careful."

"Hear that?" Rob whispered to Julian. "He feels comfortable enough to scold you."

"That's what progress looks like?" Julian said with a sigh. Rob laughed at him, but then he consoled him with a kiss.

With breakfast done, Danny got some papers and coloring pencils. The "big kids" were always talking about their homework, so Rob made up some homework for Danny too. It was just writing his name with Rob's help but he did it eagerly and he was so proud to show off his work to Julian and Christie.

"This is D for Danny," he said, pointing out a squiggle that couldn't be called a D no matter which way Julian looked at it or how hard he squinted.

"That's a really good D," Julian told him anyway and smiled at Rob.

"This is big kid paper. It has the lines. See? It's for doing writing," Danny explained to Christie.

"And you did some good writing," Christie praised him.

"Rob helped me." Right after that, Danny wanted to get back to it. "Hold my hand again, Rob. I want to write more."

That was such a sweet sight, Julian wished he could sit there and just watch them all day. But after what happened to Thayer, Julian had more work than ever plus clients to reassure, so he was back sitting at his desk again.

Stretching, ready to take a break, Julian walked out of his office and saw Christie in the hallway watching Danny and Lenny. Danny was sitting on the stairs with a book in his lap and Lenny was sitting next to him.

As Julian went over to Christie, she told him what Danny was doing. "Danny is reading to Lenny. Or pretending to read, but Lenny doesn't know the difference. He has that *Super Strong Little Bee* book memorized."

"Danny was showing off that drawing of a bee you made for him," Julian told her. He was happy that Danny was so fond of her, and it seemed to be mutual.

"He's a great kid, and it's incredible to see Rob with him. I never imagined he could be so good with kids," Christie said. "When I made him babysit with me, he always complained and then said, 'never again'."

"Really? He got an excellent recommendation, and he's amazing with Danny."

"I'm glad he's doing well. Rob was always so aimless. I was afraid he would just keep coasting along and have nothing real in his life. But he is a new man." She sounded pleased and proud of him. "I think it's because he's needed here.

"He's loved," Julian corrected her. But she was right. They needed

Rob. And Julian needed him like he needed air to breathe.

"Hey, there you are," Rob said, coming up behind them. He looked at both of them, but then focused on Christie. "Can you watch Danny and Lenny one more time before you leave?"

"Sure. I'd love to."

"Great. I'm stealing you away," Rob said to Julian as he threw him his jacket. "Danny, hold down the fort. We'll be right back."

"I guess we're going somewhere?" Julian said as he put on the jacket while walking to the front door.

"Not too far. I just want to take advantage of Christie while she's still here," Rob said and they waved to Danny before shutting the door.

Stepping out in front of the house, Rob took a deep breath and Julian admired how his chest expanded.

"Where to now?" Julian wondered, looking toward the car, thinking they might take a drive.

"How about a walk in the orchard?" Rob said as he took his hand to lead him in that direction.

Standing in rows that formed slightly crooked lanes, the trees weren't much to look at now. Only dry leaves dotted the branches, but Rob was looking up at them like he could see what they would become – green, thick with blooms then heavy with peaches that seemed to blush in the sun. Now Julian could see it too, and he couldn't wait to walk this way with Rob in every season.

"I hear people get married in this orchard," Rob said suddenly.

"Sometimes," Julian said wondering what Rob was up to bringing him out here and talking about weddings.

Rob stopped between two of the bigger trees and patted one of the tree trunks. "What do you think of this spot right here?"

"What about it?" Julian asked as Rob took him by the hand and led him two steps over.

"You can stand right here. I'll stand here and we can say our vows," Rob said while gazing intently into Julian's eyes.

"Vows?" Julian gasped and Rob squeezed his hand tighter and cupped his face.

"Marriage vows. What do you think?"

"Wha..." Julian couldn't even finish the word. All the air got knocked out of him. Rob had to kiss him to get him breathing again. "Is this your way of asking me to marry you?"

"You want me on one knee? Done," Rob said and he got down on one knee in front of him. Then he clasped Julian's hand and spoke in a deadly serious voice. "Julian, you have to marry me."

"That's not a question," Julian said ready to laugh and cry at the

same time. "But I will marry you right here. I love you so much."

"I love you," Rob said in return, his voice thick. "I understand if you need time to..."

"No. I meant what I said. Yes, I want to marry you," Julian told him and pulled him up to his feet.

Up off the ground, Rob hugged Julian till he couldn't breathe. Fingers threaded through his hair, clutching at him desperately, painfully happy, Julian had him in a vise grip too.

Stepping back and letting him take only a single breath, Rob kissed him, making him breathless all over again. The orchard seemed to spin around them, and Julian felt like he was dancing and flying and happier than he knew it was possible to be.

"God, I love you so much. I want to make you happy more than anything," Rob told him as they stopped kissing but didn't let go of each other. "I don't want a single day without hearing your voice, seeing your face, feeling you against me when I wake up. I want to marry you, Julian."

Rob's eyes melted and he looked like he would cry. Speechless, shaking with emotion, biting back tears, Julian was right there with him. He was so grateful when Rob kissed him so he could let his feelings flow into that kiss. Their lips brushed, their tongues danced, their hands were restless, searching for a way under their clothes.

Julian didn't know how much time passed while Rob pressed him against the tree trunk and they kissed. Eventually they made their way back to the house.

"Now we get to tell Danny," Rob said shutting the front door behind them.

"Me?" Danny said popping up from under the stairs.

"There you are," Christie said coming out of the library.

"Oh no, you found us," Danny said as Lenny came out from under the stairs too.

"You were playing hide and seek?" Julian said.

"I guess Christie won," Rob said to Danny. "You want to come with us and take Lenny for a walk, and we'll tell you some news?"

Both Danny and Lenny were eager for an outing. While Rob helped Danny with his jacket and his shoes, Christie gave them questioning glances.

"We'll be back soon," Rob told her with a wink. "Then you might hear some news too."

"Why do I have to wait?" they heard her asking as they went back outside.

"She can't come with us?" Danny asked.

"She has to wait her turn," Rob told him. "We want to tell you and

Lenny first."

"OK," Danny said, but he wasn't as impatient to find out as Christie was.

"You're going to be in trouble with your sister," Julian predicted keeping his voice low as he put his arm through Rob's and they followed Danny and Lenny down the path.

"She gave me a hard time. She deserves it."

After letting Danny and Lenny roam around for a while, Rob led the way back to the orchard. Julian had to stop him though. He pointed at the sign. "Dogs aren't allowed in there. Sorry. We can leave Lenny here."

Danny got down to hug his little dog. "No Lenny?"

"I'll carry him," Rob said, and he had Lenny in his arms while he took Danny by the hand.

Julian was pretty sure that wasn't allowed either. "I don't think... Oh, all right," he said, giving up.

As he followed them, Julian found himself in the same spot where Rob proposed. It was still incredible to him that such a thing really happened, and now Rob was telling Danny about it.

"We brought you here because this is a really important place," Rob said to him then he turned to Julian. "You want to tell him what's going to happen here."

Julian nodded while he tried to find his voice. It wasn't easy. He felt so choked up and his heart felt like it would burst. "This spot right here is where Rob and I are going to get married."

Danny looked all around. "Here? With me and Lenny?"

"Yes, with you two guys right beside us and everyone else too," Rob told him.

"OK," Danny said, but it was clear he didn't grasp how momentous this was.

Rob tried to explain it. "When Julian and I are married, you and me will be family."

"Like me and Julian?" Danny asked.

"Yes. We'll all be a happy family. Everyone is going to come here and celebrate with us," Rob said and smiled at Julian.

"All the kids?" Danny said, thinking of the most important people first.

"Yes, all the kids. And there will be cake," Rob said.

"Yay! Cake!" Danny said, finally getting excited.

Rob and Julian smiled at each other and kissed while Lenny looked up at them from Rob's arms.

"I love you," Julian said.

"I love you too," Rob told him.

Hearing them say that, Danny spoke up as well. "Me too. I love

Julian and Rob." Then he added, "And Lenny."

"And Lenny of course," Julian said and picked up Danny to hug him. Rob brought Lenny closer and now everyone was in on the hug.

"We love you guys too," Rob told Danny and scratched Lenny's head.

They left the orchard so Lenny could be free to scamper around. Danny and the dog ran ahead of them, and Julian and Rob followed, holding hands.

"I can already see it, you know," Rob said as he gazed into the distance.

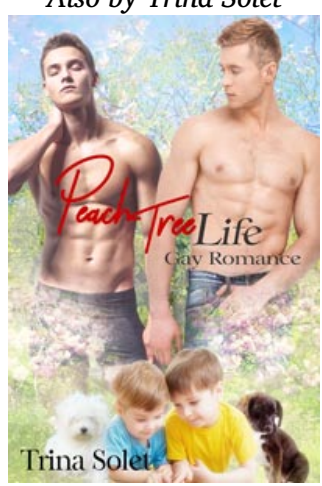
"Our wedding under the peach trees?" Julian guessed. It was all he could think about.

"The wedding and everything else. I see it stretching out in front of us like that." Rob pointed out the view in front of them with the river running through colorful autumn scenery and the sun shining down from a blue sky. "No matter what happened before, we are going to be happy. I know it."

Looking from the view to Rob's beautiful eyes, Julian believed it too.

The End

Also by Trina Solet



Peach Tree Life

Wyatt was never the good brother. He was the troublemaker, the one who escaped to Europe when his family couldn't accept who he was. But now that his older brother is gone, Wyatt is the only one who can take care of his two little nephews, DJ and Riley.

Is Wyatt up to the daunting task? No one is sure, not even him.

It's a big change in his life, but his nephews need him. After losing their parents, the two little boys are heartbroken. Wyatt doesn't want to uproot them so he moves to the small town of Peach Tree. He doesn't expect small town life to be to his liking until he meets Sam,

the young guy who works at the cafe in town.

They have an immediate connection, and Sam is the sweetest guy. But Sam is prone to panic attacks and he only just escaped his abusive ex.

Sam doesn't plan to get involved with anyone until Wyatt comes along. He thinks a real relationship between them is impossible, but Wyatt isn't so easily discouraged. He's a man who knows what he wants, and he's not afraid to go after it. Sam came into his life on the heels of tragedy and that makes Wyatt treasure him all the more.

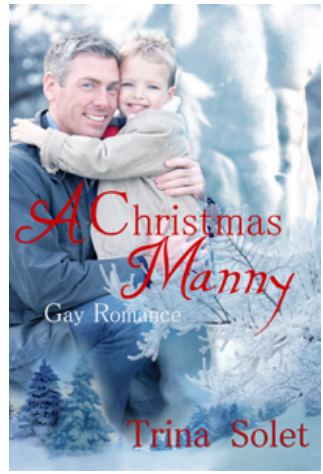
Just when Wyatt is sure to get his way, trouble finds them. With Wyatt by his side, can Sam finally fight back against his fear, or will it wreck everything he found?

Peach Tree Love

Peach Tree works its magic on Mitch and Rico as the handyman with a kid and the college student without direction find exactly what they were looking for.

When a job offer falls through, Mitch agrees to fix up an old house that hides unexpected trouble. Rico is recruited to be his assistant and can't help but fall in love with the gruff handyman. Could Mitch ever feel the same?

Until he met Rico, Mitch believed he was straight. Now his whole word has been turned upside down. After all the hardships in his life, could this be the one time when everything works out just right?



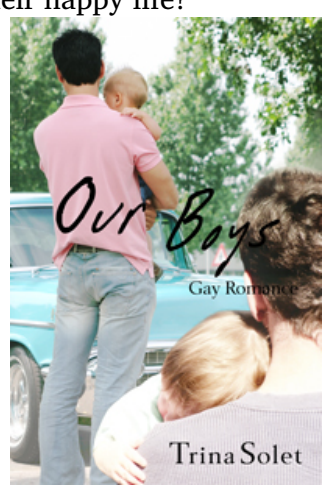
A Christmas Manny

Christmas is approaching fast and Gary Radcliff is still recovering from an injury. He can use some help especially with his little boy, Scotty. Gary doesn't want him to be cooped up when there might be snow out there any day now. He hires Wayne to help him give his kid a happy Christmas.

Wayne has worked as a health aid before but never as a manny. He takes his work seriously, but it turns out that working for Gary and Scotty is more fun than work. Right away, he fits in with those two.

He also finds himself incredibly drawn to Gary. Unaware that Gary feels the same way, Wayne thinks it's hopeless. If only Wayne can be brave enough to speak up, their attraction might turn into so much more.

It doesn't take much to ignite their desire, but will demands of real life get in the way of their happy life?



Our Boys

After getting burned in his last relationship, Diego isn't looking to get involved. He is willing to allow only one little guy into his heart. That

little guy is his irrepressible, four-year-old son, Jamie. But Trevor, a young neighbor who just moved in, might turn out to be too much of a temptation for Diego.

Trevor is taking care of his one-year-old cousin, but he's worried he might lose custody. He has quite a few challenges in his life, and Diego is driven to help him overcome them.

As the two families bond, the guys find their feelings for each other growing stronger. It's only a matter of time before they'll have to admit that they found in each other everything they ever wanted.

The Forever Manny

Marshall Bowen is more comfortable sitting in a boardroom, but now he has his baby niece, Tessa, to take care of. Until very recently, Marshall didn't even know he had a sister, and the baby is a complete shock to him. He's out of his comfort zone and doesn't know the first thing about taking care of a baby. But he'll have to learn fast.

He does have some help. Cody is his late sister's best friend, and he has become incredibly attached to the baby. After he and Cody meet, Marshall is determined to keep the young man around. It's only for Tessa's sake, of course. He would never indulge in his budding attraction to the baby's manny.

Cody is glad to help Marshall take care of Tessa, but it's only a temporary arrangement. Once Marshall gets the hang of parenting, Cody will go back to his old life. He can't stay Tessa's manny forever, can he?

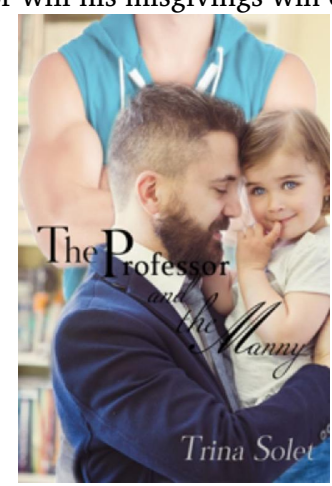
But what will happen when Cody wants more? Will Marshall want a future with him?

A Bookworm for Christmas

Miles is not looking forward to a lonely Christmas when a chance encounter with his ex boss changes his prospects.

When Miles worked at his bookstore, Gavin was a strict boss and a secret crush. Gavin's life has changed since Miles saw him last, but he still seems unattainable.

Miles can't stay away from him though and ends up spending time with his little boy too. Benji is the big change in Gavin's life, and being a dad suits him perfectly. But will he see Miles as someone who can join their family, or will his misgivings win out in the end?



The Professor and the Manny

Ned needs a babysitter for his daughter, Mina. When he hires Jeff, he ends up with a manny and so much more.

Mina is a vulnerable child who has endured too many losses. Ned has given her a new life, but she doesn't come out of her shell for just anyone.

When Jeff comes into their lives, he wins her over and starts out babysitting for only a few hours a day. That's long enough for him to

realize that he's incredibly attracted to Ned.

Ned feels the same way, but he's a professor and Jeff is a student at his college. Ned is determined to keep his distance. That only lasts until he learns that Jeff has been keeping something from him. When Ned finds out that Jeff has no place to live, he invites him home and hires him as Mina's manny.

There's no turning back now. Living in the same house, neither man can deny his feelings for long. But when danger disrupts their happy life, Jeff blames himself. Can Ned convince him to stay? The next time danger strikes, Jeff might be the only one who can protect what's most precious to them both.

Key To His Heart

Phillip Morton is a disciplined and self-assured young executive, but that's only on the surface. His heart is in turmoil. He has just discovered that his late brother might have left behind a child. This child is only a rumor, a possibility, but Phillip sets out to find him.

To help him with his search, he brings along Leon, his assistant. Leon is very young and new to his job. Phillip doesn't want things between them to turn too personal, but he needs Leon to keep him sane.

Even as he searches for his nephew, Phillip is afraid to hope. After the heart-wrenching loss of his estranged brother, it seems too much to expect that this child could be real.

It turns out that Ant, short for Anthony Morton Junior, is very real indeed. He is a sweet three-year-old living in precarious circumstances with an elderly relative. Phillip has found them just in time.

As Leon lends a hand with all the new challenges in Phillip's life, the two of them are growing closer every day. If only Leon can free himself of the demons from his childhood. While Leon's past still haunts him, he and Phillip can't rush into anything.

Will Phillip's love and patience win out in the end so they can all become a family?

A Christmas Boyfriend

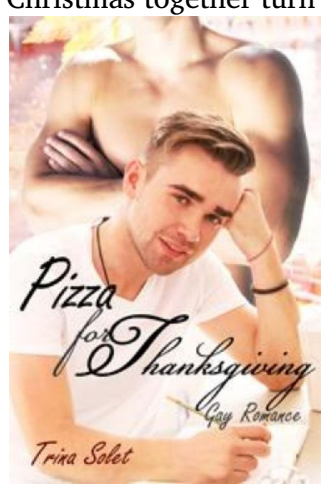
"Can you get me a man for Christmas?"

When he said those fateful words, Ben didn't know what he was setting in motion.

Ben is a busy dad to a four year old little girl. He doesn't have much time for a social life, but he wasn't serious when he asked for a man for Christmas. His daughter, Maya, doesn't know that. She is determined to play Santa and get her dad the gift he asked for.

The man she picks for her dad is her preschool teacher, Jason Kenney. Neither Jason nor Maya think he's the right man to be a present for Ben, so why is he standing there on Christmas Eve with a gift bow in his hair?

Smarting from a recent breakup, Jason isn't looking forward to the holidays. Despite his reservations, Jason gets tangled up with Ben. There is something about Ben that he just can't resist. As their feelings intensify, will spending Christmas together turn into something more?



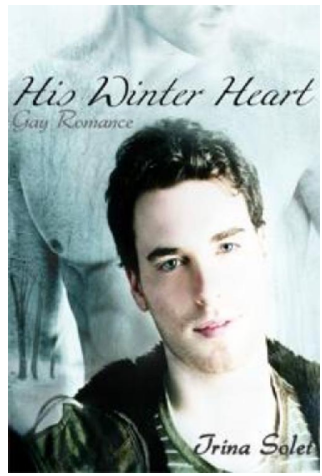
Pizza for Thanksgiving

Mack and Enzo are roommates and nothing more. While sharing the

same apartment, they live separate lives. Enzo is sweet but painfully shy. Mack is gruff and kind of intimidating. He's had a hard life and doesn't let his guard down easily.

Now Mack is anticipating a lonely Thanksgiving dinner, but Enzo won't let that happen. When he hears that Mack is going to be all alone for Thanksgiving, he gets up the courage to make him an offer. But things don't go as planned in more ways than one.

With the best of intentions, Enzo has woken up something in Mack that he might not be ready for. Can Mack stop hiding and holding back? When Enzo asks for too much from him, can he say yes anyway?



His Winter Heart

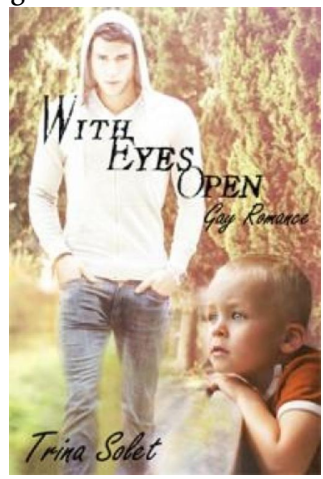
Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall, blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that he can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Colin spends with Wes, the more he wants him. Colin isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let family complications and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow

himself to love the younger man?



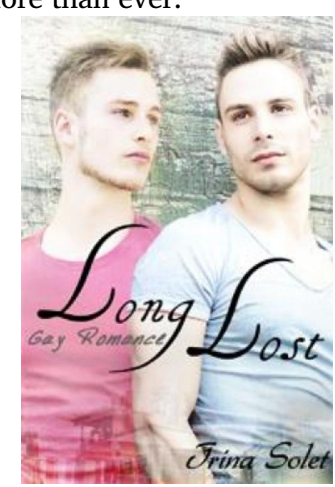
With Eyes Open

Jacob and his son, Toby, have just moved to a small town. Everything is going well so far, except for one thing – who is Toby talking to in the back garden? There's no one there.

Ian is wondering the same thing. He's taking time off from college to be with his dad. One day he sees the little boy acting strangely, and he decides to look into it.

While Ian is trying to solve the mystery of what Toby is seeing, he and Jacob grow closer. Jacob is a man Ian can trust and lean on at a difficult time. Jacob has some reservations about Ian, but his feelings are too strong to be denied. Even as unexplained events surround them, these two can't stay away from each other.

Good thing because when Ian finds the answers he's looking for, he's going to need Jacob more than ever.



Long Lost

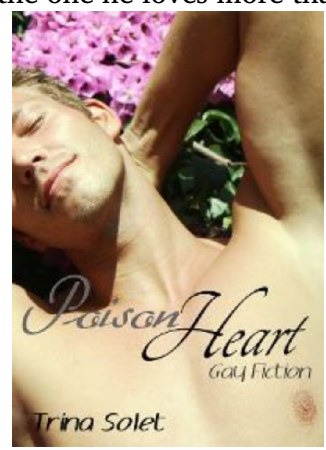
Blake Adler is back in town on a mission. Years ago Blake's father cut him out of his life so completely that he never spoke of him. Now that

his father has passed away, Blake finally gets to meet his younger brother and sister. But Blake didn't come back to Meadowview for a reunion with his lost family. He's desperate to find the man he can't live without and win back the love he threw away.

Blake and Reese were once best friends. They could have been more, but Blake screwed up the most important relationship of his life. Now he wants to fix things with Reese, if he can only find him.

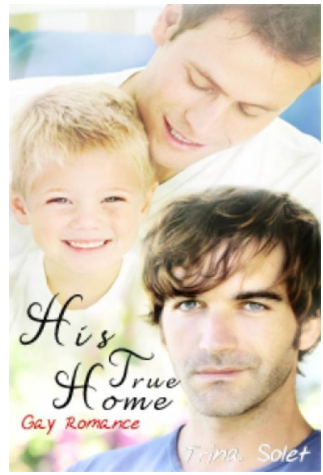
Blake isn't the only one looking for Reese. No matter how far Reese runs, trouble follows him. Wild and vulnerable, he always had it rough. The one good thing in his life was Blake.

Now Reese is taking a big risk coming back to town. It might be worth it if he can reclaim the man he can't stop thinking about, the one who rejected him, the one he loves more than anyone.



Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?



His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.

A Midnight Thanksgiving

Alex and Vaughn have been frenemies for a while, but they never spent any time alone together. That all changes on Thanksgiving night. When they become concerned about a friend in crisis, Alex and Vaughn are thrown together as they go in search of him.

The guys make an unlikely team. Alex thinks Vaughn is too uptight and would never be interested in a carefree guy like him. Vaughn thinks Alex is irresponsible, but being around him breaks down his resistance. The more time they spend together, the closer they get. By the end of the night, they can't keep their hands off each other. But will they admit how they really feel or will it all be over when their mission ends?

River Child

Until this fateful night, Will Galen lived an ordinary life in his family cottage and peaceful village. Tonight Will has set out to finally satisfy his curiosity about the mysterious, forbidden river that everyone fears. He finds no answers at the riverside, but he does find a helpless child and takes him home.

Though the child is only a sweet, three-year-old boy, he is greeted with superstition and fear by Will's father and his grandmother. They claim the boy carries the river's curse and want to cast him out. To

keep the child safe, Will must take him away from there and not look back.

As he leaves behind his family and the place where he has lived all his life, Will finds one bright spot. The man he has been lusting after comes to his rescue and takes Will and the boy home with him.

Russ is a rough looking man with a big heart. Will is more taken with him every day, but what will happen when Russ discovers the secrets Will has been keeping about the boy?

Even if Russ can accept the strange child, their troubles are not over. As Will and Russ become close, they must risk everything when a terrible curse threatens to take away the little boy they have come to love and think of as their own.

Possession

While looking for solitude, James finds love.

As soon as he arrives at the secluded, tropical villa, James knows he has found the ideal spot. Tranquil and remote, this place is just what he needs to get over a painful breakup. In perfect solitude, James's heart can begin to heal. But what if his solitude isn't so perfect, and Rob is. He is the young man who intrudes on James's privacy and steals his heart.

Rob is too much of a temptation for the cautious and uptight James. Even as he gives in to his desire, James reminds himself that this is just a vacation fling. Then why is the thought of leaving Rob tearing him apart? He can't get enough of the younger man. Once James has his body, he can't live without having his heart.

James thinks his yearning is hopeless. Then a revelation about Rob's circumstances changes everything. Will James have the courage to act on his feelings? He has to. This is his chance to have Rob, to give him the life he deserves and to truly love him.

Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a

nanny for a nice family, but they don’t need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?